

“Hang on, Rex!” he pleaded, crawling out and grasping his chum’s wrists.—Page 178.

REX KINGDON

IN THE

NORTH WOODS

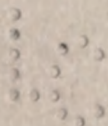
BY

GORDON BRADDOCK

AUTHOR OF "REX KINGDON OF RIDGEWOOD HIGH," ETC.

WITH FOUR HALF-TONE ILLUSTRATIONS

BY CHARLES L. WRENN



NEW YORK

HURST & COMPANY

PUBLISHERS

PZ 1
B 718
R

Copyright, 1914,
BY
HURST & COMPANY



AUG 18 1914

H. O. Co

©CLA380027

no,

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. ✓ CAUGHT IN THE STORM	13
II. ✓ MISSING COMRADES	22
III. MYSTERY ON MYSTERY	32
IV. ✓ THE SEARCH IN THE NIGHT	38
V. STARBUCK'S STORY	50
VI. A MAN WANTED	59
VII. THE FELLOW WHO WENT AWAY	66
VIII. ✓ THE CABIN IN THE WOODS	79
IX. STILL MORE MYSTERY	87
X. THE RIFLE SHOT	97
XI. A STAGGERING DISCOVERY	106
XII. THE NAME IN THE BOOK	114
XIII. THE SECRET PASSAGE	120
XIV. THE OTHER PARTY	130
XV. A DUEL ON THE WATER	142
XVI. PHILLIPS OF WALCOTT HALL	150

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVII. THE FELLOW WHO PLOTTED . . .	158
XVIII. THE RESULT	166
XIX. A LESSON TO REMEMBER	175
XX. THE PENALTY	184
XXI. THE MAN IN THE THICKET . . .	194
XXII. THE MASQUERADER	205
XXIII. REX BECOMES SERIOUS	216
XXIV. KINGDON'S CLEVERNESS	225
XXV. THE AMATEUR DETECTIVE	232
XXVI. SWIFT WORK	240
XXVII. HOW IT WAS DONE	248
XXVIII. WHEN NIPPER FORGOT	255
XXIX. FRIENDSHIP'S HAND REFUSED . .	265
XXX. TROUBLED BY REGRET	277
XXXI. THE FOREST FIRE	285
XXXII. FORGIVEN	296

ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
"Hang on, Rex!" he pleaded, crawling out and grasping his chum's wrists - - - <i>Frontispiece</i> ✓	
Involuntarily Rex pressed the bulb operating the noiseless shutter - - - - - - 78 ✓	
"Look out, Rex! Brig's going to do you dirt!" - 148 ✓	
Like a flash Ware clutched the thick, yellow mass of hair with one hand - - - - - 260 ✓	

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD.

"Rex Kingdon in the North Woods" is the second volume of THE TWENTIETH CENTURY BOYS SERIES, in which reappear nearly all the leading characters who figure in the first book, "Rex Kingdon of Ridgewood High." It is the story of a summer camping expedition in a remote wilderness near the Canadian border where the boys meet with many mishaps and adventures, and are sometimes beset by peril. Their outing, it must be confessed, is a somewhat strenuous one; yet it is enjoyed by them all, even Nipper Ware finding pleasure in it despite the determination of Rex to teach him to swim. Things begin to happen before the young vacationists can reach their destination and settle down, and continue to happen in swift succession until the climax comes in the forest fire described in the last pages. The rivalry between the two parties of campers, both from Ridgewood, enlivens matter not a little; there are contention, strife, animosity and a bit of foolhardi-

ness that teach a lasting lesson to all who participate in the affair.

Naturally, in most of these events Rex is to the fore; for he is not the sort of fellow to sit back and look on when there is anything doing. And in this story he again demonstrates his cleverness as an amateur detective by performing a bit of work that clears from suspicion a man falsely accused of crime.

A new character is introduced, Larry Phillips, of Walcott Hall, a famous preparatory school; and Larry comes forward with considerable prominence. He will be met again in the next book of the series, which will bear the title, "Rex Kingdon at Walcott Hall." For Larry's tales of the school, its mellow traditions, the advantages of its excellent educational system, its unusually high grade of pupils, its athletic sports and other luring delights, fire Kingdon with ambition to matriculate there by hook or crook. Rex enters Walcott Hall in the autumn, and those who follow his adventures will, I think, find them lively and diverting.

GORDON BRADDOCK.

New York, May 23, 1914.

Rex Kingdon in the North Woods.

CHAPTER I.

CAUGHT IN THE STORM.

A jagged, dazzling line of flame ripped through the saffron-colored clouds above the towering mountain, bathing for an instant the wide landscape in a cold glare. It lit up the bare, rocky surfaces of the upper regions and picked out distinctly the marshaled ranks of great pines thickly clustered to the very edge of the lake. Before it winked out and the crashing thunder rolled down from the heights like monstrous musketry, it brought into clear relief a large canoe darting over the glassy surface of the still water.

Four boys crowded the canoe to the exclusion of all save a very little dunnage. Only two—one in the bow, the other in the stern—were paddling. The other two sat idle, and from the

lips of one of them the flash had wrenched a sharp, startled exclamation. Instantly he bit his lips, and in the weird yellowish half-light, a look of shame overspread his freckled face. He was badly frightened, but he did not wish his companions to know it. He bent his head and, gripping the edges of the canoe with straining fingers, tried to shut out the ominous picture before him.

He couldn't. Every detail seemed printed indelibly on his brain. Through closed lids he could vividly see that terrible expanse of water, smooth, oily, unruffled everywhere. (The tops of the tall pines lining the shore were motionless. The air was close and stifling. The uncanny smothered glare in the sky struck terror to Nipper Ware's heart. It was as if all nature were waiting in suspense for the catastrophe.

"Why doesn't he head for shore?" muttered the boy under his breath. "Why doesn't he land anywhere? When it breaks it'll be on us before we can do a thing—and I can't swim!")

The keynote of his distress lay in the last three words. The lightning would not trouble him, nor the storm, if only he could face them on solid earth. What struck terror to his soul was the thought of that cold, treacherous

element lapping rhythmically against the bottom of the canoe. To his highstrung nerves, it almost seemed as if he could feel the touch of little, insistent fingers striving for a hold on him that they might drag him into the depths, never to emerge.

When a mere child Nipper had been pushed into a pond and nearly drowned by a crowd of thoughtless older boys, following which came a fear of water, that he had never been able to overcome. Time and time again, stirred by the jibes and laughter of the other boys, he had tried to conquer the weakness, but he could not forget the horror of that first experience. Instead of fading as time went on, the remembrance grew more vivid. He schooled himself against betraying his fears, but these were none the less gripping for his repression. Even though the water flowed placidly, almost sluggishly, through the North Woods wilderness, he had been nervous from the moment when, in the early morning, he had set foot in the big, safe-looking canoe. The portage into the lake had brought him fresh qualms. Now his terror was rapidly undermining his self-control.

(Another rough tongue of flame zigzagged

across the heavens, followed by swift, crackling thunder. Nipper winced and half raised himself in the canoe, his face greenish in the curious saffron glow.

“Rex!” burst from his twitching lips. “Can’t we——”

“Shore, fellows!” came in quick, decisive tones from the slim lad who sat erect and bareheaded in the stern. “We haven’t time to make the point. We’ll have to land anywhere—the quicker the better!”

With a strong sweep of his paddle he swung the craft directly toward the shore they had been approaching at an angle, and drove it forward with swift, powerful strokes. It was not Nipper’s cry that had moved him. In the shock of something the lightning flash revealed, he had been barely conscious of the boy’s shrill, hysterical protest. As the canoe swung around, there came another flash, and he saw it again—an odd, dark line far up the lake, coming toward them with incredible rapidity.

“The wind!” he muttered, his lips pressing tightly together. “Whew! Hope I haven’t waited too long!”

It was characteristic of Rex Kingdon, how-

ever, never to waste time, or even thought, in useless repining. In a flash the point, with its sheltering cabin, which he had been striving to reach more for the sake of others than himself, vanished from his mind. His lithe body, in the close-fitting, sleeveless jersey, seemed to take on an added compactness; his muscular arms drove the paddle through the water with increased force. His one object, now, was to reach shore ahead of the storm.

But, swiftly though the canoe skimmed over the water, the storm came faster. Only Kingdon, apparently, had glimpsed that line of crested water sweeping down the lake, but very quickly the rush of wind, tearing through the valley, came clearly to them all. ✓ At first a low, eerie moaning, it gathered volume until one could almost distinguish the fierce pound of waves, the lashing of great pine branches, the beat of drenching rain.

To Nipper Ware it was like some awful nightmare. In all his life he had never felt so helpless, so afraid. With staring eyes he watched the onrushing storm, and then gauged the distance they still had to cover to reach the shore, and only his faith in the boy in the stern kept him

from crying out in wild panic. But he could not let Rex know what a coward he was, and so he crouched there, biting his lips and holding back his emotion only through the hardest sort of effort.

(And then the whole dread picture was made more horrible by the swift descent of dense blackness. First the tree-tops vanished, then the outline of the shore, and the craft was left like a frail chip bobbing on a limitless expanse of ink.

Nipper's teeth dug into his under lip, his nails cut the palms of his hands. In another moment he would have shrieked aloud had not Kingdon's cheery voice cut suddenly through the darkness:

"Steady, Dick. Back water! Now forward a bit—slow. Easy, old man—easy!"

(Already the wind, with shrieking frenzy, was tearing through the treetops, when a slight bump brought from Ware's lips a gasp of surprised thanksgiving. There could be no doubt that his relief was shared by the others. Though no one spoke, the swiftness with which a landing was made and the canoe dragged clear of the water seemed rather eloquent. Nipper fairly flung himself from the craft, and the joy of

finding solid ground underfoot was one of the most relieving he had ever known.

"Pull her up all the way, fellows, and turn her over," urged Kingdon. "Hustle!"

The four lads did their best to execute the maneuver in a hurry, but darkness made haste difficult. They slipped on the rocks, bumped into trees and boulders, and finally, just as they had gripped the craft to turn it on edge, Kingdon's voice, raised in sharp surprise and wonder, halted them:

"Great scissors! Where's the other canoe, fellows? They ought to have caught up with us before now."

"Gee, yes!" ejaculated Wrenshall. "They were right behind a few minutes ago."

"Heave her over," snapped Kingdon sharply. "One, two, three—now!"

Under their combined efforts the canoe was overturned expeditiously. Then Rex whirled abruptly and, followed by the others, ran back a few steps to the edge of the lake. For a moment they stood in a huddled group, staring across the murky expanse of troubled water with straining eyes. Then Kingdon suddenly let out a shrill, piercing call which the High School lads

at Ridgewood used in signaling one another. It sounded high above the whistling wind, but there was no response. A moment later a blinding flash of lightning lit up the whole lake, and Rex, staring back along their course, saw nothing but tossing waves.

(Then the rain came in drenching sheets,) but still the boys did not at once give up. In chorus they shouted the names of the missing lads, their voices sounding shrilly between thunderclaps. Each time the lightning flashed they hoped to see the missing canoe, but in vain.

"No use standing here and getting soaked, fellows," said Rex Kingdon at last. "They've landed at some other place. I remember, now, that they haven't been in sight since we passed the second island. We may as well crawl under our canoe and wait until this mess is over."

No time was wasted in following the suggestion. Fortunately, the small amount of dunnage they carried was wrapped securely in waterproof covering and did not have to be considered. Like gophers diving for their holes, each boy flung himself on the ground and wriggled under the hastily improvised shelter. They were protected by the canoe from the beating

fury of the storm, but that did not prevent little streams, trickling over the uneven ground, from entering and attacking them at the most unexpected points. For a space they were too busy shifting about in an effort to escape the worst of these rivulets to do much talking, or even thinking. Then, all at once, above the roar of wind and the lash of beating rain, Dick Wrenshall's voice was raised in a sudden shout:

“Jumping jingoes! If those fellows haven't landed at the island, or anywhere else, it puts us in a fine pickle. We've hardly a scrap of dunnage to our names!”

CHAPTER II.

MISSING COMRADES.

For a moment nobody spoke. Then Scott drew a quick breath.

"That's right, Dick," he said. "We haven't as much as a blanket—and I don't believe there's a bite of anything to eat."

"And if they did land on the island," added Nipper Ware, "there's a swell chance of their getting off it to-night. I see where we go without supper, and keep warm by playing tag."

He spoke lightly, for, once off the hated water, nothing seemed to matter very much. Yet, in spite of his outward indifference, Nipper did not look with any more joy than the others on the prospect of a chill and supperless evening. Nevertheless, that seemed to be the fate in store for them. Practically all their dunnage was in the missing canoe, in charge of Kent Starbuck and Louis Lebaude. It had packed better that way at the little railroad station, and, since the two crafts were to keep close together all the

way up to the lake, it seemed to be a trifling matter how they divided their cargo. Nipper wished now that Scott had gone in the other boat and allowed a proper amount of provisions and blankets to be stowed away in his place.

"I'm not worrying so much over going without supper," remarked Kingdon presently, "as about anything happening to Kent and Baudie. It doesn't seem as if they'd dropped off at that island unless something was wrong with the canoe. The storm was only just beginning to look threatening."

"Are you sure they landed?" Wrenshall asked.

"No, but I didn't see them after we rounded the lower side of the island and headed for the point. You know we kept in pretty close to shore then. They weren't more than a hundred yards behind us. Kent had just hollered to me about the old shack on the point and how we ought to reach it before the rain came. I didn't look back again till we were a quarter of a mile beyond the island, and they weren't in sight. Then it got too dark to see any distance, and I supposed they were chasing along behind us. Now I don't know what to think."

The roar and fury of the tempest and the

cramped positions of the four lads, obliged as they were to be constantly on the alert against some fresh inundation, made conversation difficult.

Thinking of the train of distressing incidents, Nipper began to wonder whether camping in the big woods was all it had been cracked up to be. When Rex had suggested this method of spending part of the summer vacation, Ware had met the proposal with enthusiasm, mainly, it must be confessed, because of his extraordinary liking for Kingdon. Now he began to suspect that he had acted with undue haste and impulse. It wasn't the wet and darkness and going without supper that affected him most, for these were merely disagreeable details; but it had suddenly been borne upon him that the lake was going to prove decidedly arduous to get away from during their stay here. When the crowd of campers were not in it they would probably be on it. From a distance Nipper had been able to look upon this second contingency with resignation. So long as he wasn't obliged to take swimming lessons, he told himself he wouldn't mind fishing or canoeing or anything of that sort if undertaken in a safe craft; on the spot, he found he did mind

very much. To consider anything like a repetition of to-night's fright filled him with fresh panic. Rather than undergo that, he would feign illness or a summons home, or anything which would get him out of the unpleasant position his folly had placed him in.

Nipper regretted that he was not like other boys who went swimming as unconcernedly as they took to a tub. He would have given the world to do so, and yet it never occurred to him that sheer will power on his part might accomplish the seemingly impossible. Without realizing it, he had long ago given up making an effort and lapsed into merely wishing, a process which was at this moment interrupted by Kingdon's voice and action.

"Well, the fireworks are about over, I reckon," briskly commented the older lad, slipping out from under the canoe. "We may as well build a fire and dry out."

"Build a fire!" growled Scotty. "You talk like a dill pickle. How are you going to make a fire with everything soaked through?"

"I'm such a warm baby that there won't be any trouble at all," chuckled Kingdon. "Back up! You're stepping on your foot."

Somehow this foolish joshing made Nipper feel more cheerful. He crawled out from under the canoe, followed closely by Wrenshall and Scott, and found that the storm had passed on to the south, leaving the woods drenched and still dripping, but no longer pitch black. Even under the trees it had brightened considerably, and through a rift in the branches they could see the western sky across the lake streaked with the crimson glow of sunset. Off to the south, lightning still flashed and glimmered and the roll of thunder sounded at intervals, but it all seemed far away and unimportant.

"Going to cut down a tree, are you?" fatuously remarked Wrenshall, as he observed Kingdon secure his ax and take off the leather case.

"Oh, no; I just want to make myself a tooth-pick," returned the blond lad blandly.

Interestedly Nipper watched him approach a good sized white birch which at some former time had been blown over, the top being upheld by the trunk of a mammoth pine. With deft understrokes, he drove the ax into the lower side of the tree again and again, each time cutting out of the trunk a short, thick faggot. Having accumulated a dozen of these, he gathered them

up and carried them back to a flat spot near the canoe. They were bone dry, and, with the aid of a little tinder from the butt of the same tree, Rex soon had a bright fire burning merrily.

"Now all we have to do is to keep it fed with stuff from that birch or any other dead hardwood," he said briskly. "Say, Nip, weren't there some sandwiches left after we finished lunch?"

Ware stared for a moment, open-mouthed, then fell suddenly upon the small heap of dunnage and pawed it frantically right and left. He sat up at last, clasping the remains of what had once been a stout pasteboard box.

"They're soaked to a pulp," he groaned pettishly, after investigating. "Hang it! If I'd only remembered——"

"Stick 'em by the fire to dry out," suggested Kingdon. "With no other food in sight, we can't afford to be squeamish. Besides, they're wrapped in oiled paper."

Nipper promptly followed the suggestion and spread the contents of the box, including a paper of salt, to dry. Meanwhile Kingdon cut some more wood and some stout saplings for a leanto. Having erected the saplings, he opened the dun-

nage to see what they had, and, with Wrenshall's help, carried the canoe back to the lake again. His manner, the while, was entirely confident. He joked and laughed and made comments with a whimsical humor which soon had everyone grinning in complete forgetfulness of their discomforts, past and present. Even Nipper ceased worrying about the water, especially when he found that the sandwiches were going to be palatable, at least.

"They're not half bad," declared Wrenshall when each boy had received his share. "I only wish there were more of 'em. What's that thing you've got, Nipper?"

"Salt," returned Ware, balancing the hard little cylinder on the end of one finger. "It dried hard. Reminds you of Lot's wife when she looked back. Somehow I never could swallow that yarn."

"Why not?" inquired Kingdon, bending forward to lay another stick on the fire. "I've known queerer things than that to happen myself."

"Humph!" sniffed Ware skeptically. "For instance?"

"Well," said the blond lad solemnly, "only last

week, when Kent and I were coming out of the Portland station, a pretty girl crossed the street. Immediately Kent turned to rubber."

"Rotten," said Nipper with a horrible grimace. "That's a stale one, Rex. You ought to be ashamed."

"I am. To hide my shame I'm going to take Dick and go find out what's become of those two young idiots and our dunnage."

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed Nipper, his eyes widening. "You're not going out on the lake tonight, are you?"

"Why not?"

Ware shrugged his shoulders. "It'll be awful rough," he mumbled. "And how will you find the island in the dark?"

Kingdon laughed. "Where are your eyes, Nip?" he inquired with a wave of his hand toward the lake.

Nipper followed the direction of the gesture and flushed slightly. The moon was just showing above the dark crest of the wooded mountain range. The silvery light made a wide path across the rippling water which showed no sign of the enormous waves Ware had expected to see.

"I didn't know it would quiet down so quick," he explained in some embarrassment. "How long will you be gone?"

"Not a great while. You fellows had better cut pine boughs for the leanto and some to stick up at the back. And don't forget to keep the fire going. Come on, Dick."

Wrenshall took his place in the bow, and Rex got into the stern and pushed off.

"Don't get lost while we're gone," he called back jokingly to the two lads standing together on the bank.

The canoe swept out into the lake, propelled dexterously by the paddlers. At once they headed in the direction of the island where Kingdon had last seen his missing friends. For some time, by moving his head the least bit, Rex could see the yellow glimmer of their own campfire shining across the water. He could even make out a shadow now and then as one of the fellows crossed in front of it. When the light finally winked out he was rather sorry. It was a cheerful gleam that told of warmth and brightness and human companionship—somewhat rare qualities in the great north woods. Unconsciously his glance swept the borders of the lake question-

ingly, but no other yellow twinkle sprang out of the blackness to reward his keen scrutiny. His forehead wrinkled slightly, and as he settled down to paddle, there was a touch of perplexity on his clean-cut, handsome face.

CHAPTER III.

MYSTERY ON MYSTERY.

The trip to the island was a silent one. For all his joshing and ostensible carelessness, Kingdon was much more troubled about the missing members of the party than he had let anyone suppose. It was difficult to imagine anything serious having happened, yet no other explanation seemed acceptable. Kent Starbuck was scarcely the sort of fellow to be frightened by a distant thunderstorm into putting in at a scrap of an island. He was much more likely to get up steam and try to beat the other canoe to the point.

"That's what I thought he was doing, and I hustled to keep ahead of him," murmured Kingdon under his breath. "Now I wish I hadn't been in such a hurry."

Presently the island loomed up ahead of them in the silvery moonlight, looking like some dark, misty shadow which would dissolve at a breath. As they came nearer, however, it took on a more solid appearance. (Some big pines and hemlocks,

having found root on its narrow, rocky surface, showed up clearly, making splendid foils for clusters of ghostly silver birches.

It was a tiny bit of land, across which one could almost throw a stone.) Kingdon paddled in close and sent up the shrill, familiar yell which the crowd used when seeking one another.

"Hi, Kent!" he called, when no answer came. "Take the cotton out of your ears and show yourself."

(Still there was not even an echo, and the dead silence struck a chill in Kingdon's heart. There was something uncanny in the utter stillness of the little island, bathed in that cold, white light.) He glanced at Wrenshall and found he had twisted about and was regarding him with troubled uneasiness.

"They're not here," Dick said in a worried tone.

"Looks that way," admitted Rex. "Suppose we paddle around the island and see if there's anything to be seen. It won't take five minutes."

The canoe moved forward without a sound save the gentle lapping of wavelets against the side. Out of the moonlight into the shadow it

glided, suddenly becoming a part of the silent picture. (A line of rocks, half submerged, jutted out twenty feet or so from this side of the island, making a *détour* necessary. After avoiding the obstacle, Rex's first impulse was to cut toward the shore at an angle. Then something moved him to turn in directly, and a second or two later Wrenshall's swift exclamation of startled amazement broke the silence:

"Look, Rex! The other canoe!"

Kingdon made no comment, but his heart began to pound unevenly as he swerved their own craft close beside the other that lay with one end resting on a narrow stretch of pebbly beach which seemed like a natural landing place.

Dark as it was, the boy knew in an instant that Wrenshall had made no mistake. It was the canoe Starbuck and Lebaude had accompanied them in for the better part of the day's journey. The dunnage lay packed amidships, just as all six had helped stow it away that morning. The paddles were tucked carefully between the tarpaulin covered bundles and the sides of the craft, beyond any possibility of shaking loose. Everything seemed shipshape and in order, yet—where were the occupants?

Kingdon sat motionless for no longer than it took an exploring hand to discover these simple facts. Then he stepped hastily ashore and, lighting a match, made a more thorough examination. The canoe was not tied, but simply run up a little way on the gentle slope. There was a good deal of water in it that might have been shipped from the lake or been the result of the late down-pour. Lastly, striking matches to look, they could perceive no footprints either on the beach or further inland, where the soil was a soft loam. The recent storm, however, might have obliterated them.

Bewildered and apprehensive, the two boys searched every inch of the island without discovering a sign of human presence. Back beside the canoes, they stood surveying one another queerly through the gloom.

"I don't understand what's happened to them," Wrenshall said almost in a whisper.

"It's got me, too," confessed his companion. "I don't see how both could go overboard without upsetting the canoe. If such a thing happened, it might have drifted in here; but look at the paddles. If they ever really landed, where in mystery are they now?"

For a moment or two there was silence. Then Wrenshall moistened his lips with his tongue.

"What had we better do about it?" he asked a bit unsteadily.

Kingdon hesitated an instant. "I think we'd better tow the canoe over to camp, put Jim and Nipper wise, and then start out again unhampered. It'll take only a few minutes longer, and it's worth that short delay to be sure of our supplies. There's no use staying here."

"Not a bit," agreed Wrenshall. "We've gone over the place with a fine-tooth comb. I should say the sooner we were off the better."

Something akin to a panic seemed to have seized both of them at the same instant, making them eager to get away from the ill-omened island. Not a moment was lost in tying fast the deserted canoe to their own and paddling out of the shadow into the moonlight. They did not pause, but bent over their paddles until the craft fairly flew through the water.

As the cheerful gleam of their campfire leaped into sight again, Kingdon straightened up.

"That looks mighty nice and comfortable," he commented aloud. "You get awful sick of this moonlight."

He kept his eyes fixed on the yellow glow, but failed to observe any passing shadows this time. Evidently Ware and Scotty were taking things easy.

"Trying the balsam boughs in the leanto," he decided a few minutes later, as he leaped out of the canoe and approached the fire. Aloud he went on in brisk chiding: "You fellows certainly aren't hurting yourselves work——"

The words trailed away abruptly as he stared around with widening eyes. Beside him Wrenshall's jaw dropped and his tanned face slowly turned the color of putty.

The fire was burning briskly. The leanto had been well backed with boughs and the bottom filled with them to a depth of two feet. One or two of the packages had been opened and the contents spread about in orderly array, giving the camp a garnished look. But of the two lads who had done it all not a sign remained. Like Starbuck and Lebaude, they had vanished.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SEARCH IN THE NIGHT.

It was a full minute before either of the boys moved or spoke. Then Kingdon turned to his companion.

"I wonder——" he began musingly, but stopped there, his glance seeking the ground beside the fire.

"Well?" queried Wrenshall with nervous impatience. "Why don't you finish?"

Kingdon shrugged his shoulders. "I can't quite see why they should play a trick like this."

"Think it's a trick?"

"I don't see what else it can be. Probably they heard us coming and thought it would be a good joke to hide. Nipper's a silly boob sometimes."

Stepping forward, he shifted the position of some of the sticks on the fire, thereby improving the draught. Then he picked up the ax and walked over to the birch tree. But he did no chopping. Wrenshall was surprised to see the

ax laid aside, and almost immediately the gleam from a pocket torch glimmered through the undergrowth. His name being called, Dick lost no time in responding, and found Rex examining the ground beyond the fallen tree.

"Reckon I was mistaken that time, old man," said Kingdon, his voice expressive of repressed excitement. "Look there!"

He threw the little circle of light downward, and Wrenshall's eyes eagerly searched the ground. At first he could see only a few rather indistinct footprints made by stout, hobnailed boots such as the two boys had been wearing; but presently he realized that there were others, blurred and indistinct—alien marks of feet in moccasins. He caught his breath, striving to keep his expression calm, and glanced questioningly at Kingdon.

"There's been somebody else here," he said in a voice which was not entirely steady.

Rex nodded. "And the fellows are evidently trailing him. Come."

Keeping the light on the ground, he moved away from the lake. Even Wrenshall, unversed as he was in woodcraft, could read something of the story in the footprints. Moc-

casined feet went first at a lope, which sometimes increased to a run. The man seemed to have traveled with the smooth, effortless ease of one entirely familiar with his locality. (Always he kept the level, unobstructed way, leaving trees and tangled undergrowth for the hobnails stumbling after. The latter were running, too, if one could judge from the look of the trail, but in a manner which gave small promise that they would overtake the one pursued.

For more than five minutes the two boys hurried through the woods in silence. Then Kingdon stopped abruptly, and the torch winked out. In the stillness that followed Wrenshall was aware of a distant rustling which increased rapidly, as if a person or large animal was coming straight in their direction. He wondered why Rex did not move out of the patch of moonlight in which he stood, and he even wished they had brought one of the guns along. When Kingdon's shrill whistle, giving the school call, split the silence, Wrenshall jumped as if he had grasped a live wire. The prompt answer to the call brought a sheepish expression to his face and made him peer furtively at his companion.

Rex was giving his entire attention to the two lads who, at that moment, came into sight among the trees.

"Well," he questioned, "who was he?"

"Ask me!" panted Scott with some heat. "He got away."

"Didn't you get a look at him?"

"Nary a glimpse. He went through the woods like a dog with a bunch of firecrackers tied to his tail."

"You bet!" agreed Ware, taking a long breath. "I saw a bit of his shadow when he was watching us from behind the fallen birch, but that was the closest we ever came."

On the way back to camp the details of the affair were briefly narrated. After the departure of the canoe, the two boys had worked briskly building up the fire, cutting boughs for the leanto, and unpacking. They made considerable racket at this work, and in the sudden succeeding silence, while they sprawled on the pine boughs, they heard a slight rustling in the leaves, which brought them both up to investigate. Nipper, probably by sheer luck, happened to spy the shadow back of the birch tree, and in a moment the chase was on. The boys had pursued en-

tirely by sense of sound, and at no time had they a chance of overtaking the unknown. They simply followed as long as the sounds made by the departing man guided them; when those ceased they turned back.

"Didn't you call to him?" asked Kingdon.

"Sure," answered Scotty. "When Nip first got a glimpse of him through the trees he sung out to find out who he was and what he wanted; but the fellow hit the high spots without answering. I don't see what he was after, snooping like that."

"And where did he come from?" added Ware quickly. "Buck told us there wasn't even a logging camp on this part of the lake, didn't he?"

Kingdon nodded. He was thinking of that very remark of the missing Starbuck anent the absolute wildness of the region around the lake where they had planned to make their camp. The little frontier settlement of Tobique was up at the head of the lake, fourteen miles away, and back in the forest on the other side of the water were the headquarters of a small logging outfit; but the whole western shore was practically a primeval wilderness, undisturbed by even the "sports," as the natives termed visiting hunters

and fishermen. Therefore Rex found it impossible to account for the presence and curious behavior of the unseen stranger.

He did not have much time to spend trying to solve the problem. Already he had wasted many precious minutes that should have been devoted to searching for the missing boys. Back at camp, he hastened to give Scott and Ware a brief account of their failure at the island, and then turned to Wrenshall.

"Seeing that this fellow's snooping around, I reckon you'd better stay and look after things," he said. "Nipper can go with me just as well."

Wrenshall agreed promptly, and they walked down to the canoes. They were so busy discussing how much of the dunnage should be unpacked that neither of them noticed the ill-concealed anxiety of Ware.

"I wouldn't take out anything but the blankets and a little grub," advised Kingdon, looking down at the dunnage in the canoe. "No matter what happens, we'll leave here in the morning and——" He broke off abruptly, his eyes widening. "By Jove!" he cried. "What a bright intellect I have! Those are the *spare* paddles, Dick! That's the extra pair we brought, in case

anything happened to the others. The ones they were using are gone!"

"But where——"

"I've no more idea than you have. The whole thing's a staggering mystery. Come ahead, Nip. Don't go to sleep! What's the matter? Don't you want to go?"

"Wh-why, yes—of course," stammered Nipper flushing deeply. "I was just thinking, though, that I'm—er—not much use with the paddle. I haven't been in a canoe more than half a dozen times in my life."

Kingdon frowned slightly, his glance searching Nipper's face in the moonlight before shifting to Jim Scott. "How about you, Scotty?" he questioned. "Want to risk your life on the high seas with me?"

"Aye, aye, captain," said Scott, stepping quickly into the boat and taking up a paddle.

Rex followed, and they pushed out upon the lake, turning southward at once. After a desultory conversation the talk grew more and more intermittent, finally ceasing altogether. In spite of his pretense to the contrary, Kingdon was desperately worried about the two missing boys. The mystery of their disappearance had been

bad enough in the first place, but the realization of a few moments before that the paddles they had used were missing also, had added vastly to Rex's anxiety. He felt almost certain now that there had been a spill of some sort. How it had come about he had no idea, and he could not understand in what manner the canoe had been drawn up on the shore of the island cove. But he did remember Lebaude's notorious recklessness on the water—a recklessness which, more than once, had resulted in upsets.

To have a starting point, Rex headed for the island. After circling it without seeing a sign of life they paddled southwest, taking a course in which any floating object would be driven by the wind. Approaching the shore they paddled slowly along, searching keenly for a glimmer of fire or any other signs of human beings, and pausing every now and then to send a shrill call echoing through the night woods. ✓

Almost down to the portage they went without the stillness being once broken save by their shouts, the dip of their own paddles, and the slap of wavelets against the sides of the canoe. The return trip proved equally fruitless. The moon had swung across into the western sky and

was beginning to pale before the glow of approaching dawn by the time they put in to the bank below the campfire. Their anxious comrades stepped out to meet them.

In answer to eager questions, Kingdon told of the fruitless quest. Wrenshall and Ware stared at him in dismay.

"What's happened to them?" gasped the latter in a frightened voice. "You don't think——"

"I've been thinking till I'm dizzy," cut in Rex quickly. "The whole business has me wabbling. I only know they weren't on the island and their canoe was. It looked to me as if they'd never even set foot ashore. There might have been a spill. They might both have gone overboard, you know, and the canoe drifted to the spot where we found it."

"But the canoe—it would have upset, wouldn't it?" asked Nipper.

"I'm not sure. Once on a time I got a spill out of a canoe and it didn't turn over; it just shot out from under me and left me in the drink. But for that to happen to two chaps in the same canoe—it doesn't seem likely."

"And if they did go out that way, why on

earth wouldn't they swim to the island?" exclaimed Wrenshall.

"Don't you suppose I've been asking myself that very question all night?" protested Kingdon with impatience. "I simply know they didn't, and since that's the case, the only alternative was the mainland." With deliberate purpose he ignored the third gruesome possibility—that they might not have made land at all.

"They couldn't swim that far," Wrenshall objected.

"Kent could," asserted Rex positively. "He's a regular duck in the water. Baudie's not nearly so good, but together they should have made it."

"We ought to do something," Wrenshall cried in a worried tone after a brief pause. "It doesn't seem right to sit down and twiddle our thumbs."

Kingdon looked at him oddly for an instant. He smiled grimly. "I shouldn't exactly call it twiddling thumbs," he said. "Scotty and I have been fairly busy most of the night. I know how you feel, old man," he went on in a different tone. "Sitting still is about the meanest way of passing the time, but there's no reason why you shouldn't be up and doing directly. First of all, I think we'd better move over to the point, so

the fellows will know where to find us. After that we can start out fresh to learn what's become of them."

His tone, brisk and cheerful, seemed to bring encouragement to the other boys. The packing was accomplished in short order, and the two canoes were soon gliding along the shore toward the jutting point of land that had been their intended destination the night before. Nipper was with Kingdon, and Rex promptly began a lesson in the art of paddling which occupied his own mind as well as that of the younger boy, and kept him for the time being from worrying over the situation.

The point—so far as any of the fellows knew it had no name—was a bold mass of rocks jutting prominently into the lake. On the southern side the banks were sheer and steep, but paddling around the end, they came upon a sheltered cove with a gentle sandy slope that made an ideal landing place.

A cabin stood back among the trees some distance from the water. It was of logs, with a chimney at the further end, and looked uncommonly solid and substantial for a hunter's shack. The boys commented on this as they briskly ap-

proached it. Then, all at once, Kingdon discovered a wisp of smoke curling from the chimney.

Puzzled, surprised, he halted. Unconsciously, the thought of the mysterious spy of the night before was in his mind. As he stared speculatively at the building, the door swung open, and Kent Starbuck stood on the threshold, grinning cheerfully.

CHAPTER V.

STARBUCK'S STORY.

A moment of petrified silence was broken by a concerted yell that made the echoes ring as the four boys flung themselves in a body on the lad in the doorway.

"One of the lost babes!" they cried in mock displeasure, but with an undercurrent of fervent thankfulness. "Where have you been?" "What do you mean by ducking out on the crowd?" "Where's Baudie? What the deuce have you done with Baudie?"

"Shoot 'em over the plate one at a time," besought Starbuck, smiling. "I didn't duck out; I ducked in—to the lake. As for doing anything to Baudie, I wish you would. He's to blame for it all, and if he'd got his due he'd be food for fishes instead of taking his ease before the fire in here."

The smiling, rosy-cheeked face of the Canadian boy appeared over Starbuck's shoulder.

"You mus' not believe half what he say, fel-

lows," he chuckled. "He has a mad-on against poor me. Eet was really not'ing but a' accident that make me overspill out of the boat."

"Accident your grandmother!" retorted Starbuck with some heat. "It was your crazy jumping around that did it. You know the way he twists and turns," he appealed to the others, "just as if he was in a flat-bottom scow instead of a canoe? Well, he did it once too often and went head over heels into the drink. I managed to stay in until he had to go and pull me after him when I tried to get him back over the bow."

"For the love of goodness," put in Wrenshall hastily, "tell us why you swam to the mainland instead of the island."

"Swam!" exclaimed Starbuck in astonishment. "We didn't swim; we went in a canoe."

"A canoe!" echoed Kingdon incredulously.

Starbuck nodded, his face suddenly serious. "It wasn't ours," he explained. "I'm afraid, fellows, we're in a bad hole. Our canoe, with all the dunnage, is at the bottom of the lake."

Wrenshall's lips parted impulsively, but, happening to catch Kingdon's warning glance, he kept silent. Rex frowned with real displeasure.

"That's nice!" he commented gruffly. "But if

you sunk your own canoe, who wafted you ashore?"

"You've got me," admitted Starbuck. "I haven't any more idea than the man in the moon. The whole thing was the wildest experience I ever went through. Do you remember the last time you looked back, just after you circled the island?"

"Yes," answered Kingdon. "You were a couple of hundred feet off shore."

"Just about. It was beginning to get dark. Perhaps half a minute later I gave Baudie a call for squirming around. He near had us upset. I might just as well have talked to a dummy for all the good it did. He did it again within two minutes." He turned to glare accusingly at the Canadian boy who leaned smilingly against the doorcasing.

"There was not one thought of the wrong in my mind, ol' man," protested Lebaude blandly. "I only look to see what she is that crosses the lake to come at us."

"Well, you did a fine stunt," sniffed Starbuck. Then he grinned in spite of himself. "You ought to have seen him, fellows. It was neat, all right. He was paddling for dear life, but when he rose

and looked back the canoe shot out from under him, and he took the most beautiful header you ever saw. I managed to keep right side up by quick work, and when he came up I was there, ready to pull him in over the end. It was ticklish business, and I'd never have tried it but for the dunnage acting as ballast. I leaned 'way over the bow and got hold of him, and then the crazy loon tried to climb up over me. Of course I went out head first, and we both sank about two miles. I had no idea the lake was that deep anywhere. When we finally came up the canoe was gone—sunk, of course. But we weren't more than fifty feet off shore, and I had started to swim in with Baudie when, all at once, another canoe shot around the end of the island and almost ran us down."

"Another one!" said Wrenshall in astonishment. "But who——"

"Haven't the least idea. There was only one man in it. His hat was pulled down over his face, and by that time it was too dark to see much of anything but a bushy beard. He was coming straight for us when I yelled, and he swerved off. Then I asked him to take us in to the island, where I thought we could wait till

you came back to look for us. He hesitated at first, but finally agreed, and told us how to climb in while he acted as counterbalance in the other end of the canoe. But he hadn't taken more than a stroke or two toward the island when, of a sudden, letting out a snarl, he whirled the canoe around and dug for the mainland. Then I saw another canoe with three men in it skim round the end of the island and come after us."

"La! la!" murmured Kingdon as the narrator paused momentarily. "Some doings on the troubled waters!"

"Doings galore. There was a spare paddle aboard, and in two shakes our friend had me working it. We could just manage to keep our lead. The pursuers didn't gain any, but we couldn't seem to pull away from them. And all the time the storm was coming closer and closer and it was getting dark as a pocket. At last the canoe behind sort of faded out of sight, and pretty soon I could make out the shadowy outline of trees along the shore. 'Jump the minute we touch, both of you,' ordered the man. 'Run straight back from the lake, and don't let 'em catch you.'

"Did we jump? Ask me! There didn't seem to be much else to do. Baudie landed sprawling

in some bushes, and I went up to my knees in muck. When we got untangled, our friend and the canoe had disappeared, and the other gang was almost on us. We went right away from there without further delay."

"Like a pair of simps," said Kingdon. "They were after the other fellow, not you. If you'd only stayed where you were——"

"That sounds logical now," admitted Starbuck with a wide grin. "It was different last night, though. We didn't know who or what they were, and we'd got all worked up trying to skin away from them in the canoe. It was thundering and lightning, and we were scared. So we ran, and somebody yelled something as we beat it. Then they shot at us. That helped us move along quite a lot faster, though sometimes our progress was interrupted when we tried to butt down a tree. In a couple of minutes the storm broke. After that we had our work cut out just trying to keep from being drowned."

"Jinks!" exclaimed Nipper Ware. "Didn't you find anything to crawl under?"

"Nothing but a tree, and that didn't shed water to brag of. It came mighty near being struck by lightning, too. Oh, it was real lively and

jolly! Anyhow, we got away, and we didn't drown. When the storm began to let up we headed for the point where we thought you fellows would be."

"You must have traveled a long distance inland to miss our campfire," said Kingdon.

Starbuck's jaw dropped. "Cæsar's ghost!" he exclaimed. "Was that your fire! Oh, me! Oh, my! Baudie and I saw it, but we were afraid it might be the crowd that had chased us, so we gave it a wide berth."

"Well, we're all alive and together again, so what's the use to bibble?" remarked Kingdon. "Everything considered, we're all in luck. What sort of a place is this, anyhow?" he went on, stepping into the cabin and glancing around.

The interior was empty of furniture and exceedingly dirty; but for all that it held not a little promise. The roof seemed tight and the chimney at the further end, with the stone fireplace, in which a fire was burning briskly, certainly drew well.

"Oh, pretty fair, pretty fair," commented Wrenshall approvingly. "Let's get our stuff up and cook breakfast. I'm empty as a bass drum."

"Breakfast!" exclaimed Starbuck incredulously. "Why, where——"

"Oh, we've got a little something to masticate," interrupted Rex airily. "I don't know how far it will go, and I'll be hanged if you two ought to have a nibble after the careless way you lost most of the dunnage. Still, if you'll help carry it up——"

"Lead me to it!" ejaculated Kent emphatically. "I could eat a fried bootleg. Wake up, Baudie!" He punched the Canadian lad vigorously in the ribs. "Grub in sight, old boy—and I thought we'd have to keep on starving till we'd brought something from Tobique."

With his face quite serious, Kingdon led the way down to the sandy landing place. Not until they were close to them did Starbuck see the two canoes drawn up side by side. He stopped short, his mouth and eyes open to their widest extent, his face full of incredulous wonder. Lebaude's surprise was equally comical, and the other boys fairly roared with laughter. Not until they had extracted the utmost possible enjoyment out of the situation did Kingdon volunteer an explanation. When he had finished, Starbuck drew a long breath.

"I wish somebody'd kick me hard," he murmured whimsically. "Think of the pesky thing being there all the time when I thought it had sunk! I suppose, when Baudie pulled me in, I gave it a push that sent it straight ashore. If I'd had any idea——"

He stopped abruptly, an odd catch in his voice. Around the rocky headland of the point glided a canoe containing three men, all more or less hard looking. At the sight of the group of boys, looks of astonishment passed over their faces. Then one of them said something in a low tone to the others and, with a sweep of his paddle, sent the craft close inshore and brought it to a halt.

CHAPTER VI.

A MAN WANTED.

"Well!" growled the big, rough-hewn young fellow in the bow. "What are you chaps doin' here?" His eyes came to rest on Kingdon's face, and Rex returned his frowning look with pleasant blandness.

"We're picking out a summer hotel site," said the boy. "Don't you think this point would be a good one?"

The big youth started; then he scowled blackly. "Fresh!" he grunted. "I s'pose you think that's funny. I'll bet you was the guy that was with Black Michaud last night. Where is he? You might as well come over with it, first as last."

"I won't dispute you," drawled Kingdon. "Arguments always are unpleasant. I'm afraid, though, I can't oblige you in this case. I never even heard of your amiable friend before."

"No friend of mine!" snapped the fellow harshly. "He's a curse to the country hereabouts. But he's done for himself this time," he went on, a gleam of malignant satisfaction

in his eyes. "It's one thing to smuggle stuff over the line and shoot game out of season, and another thing to break into a store and rob the till. He'll get his. Still going to pretend you didn't see him?"

Kingdon's lips continued to smile, but into his blue eyes crept a hard look. "Lying," he said, "doesn't happen to be my long suit. We started up from the portage yesterday to camp on this point. The storm delayed us, and we didn't reach here till this morning. You're the first human beings, besides my friends, that I've set eyes on since leaving Jud Harben's. That's straight from the shoulder, but whether you believe it or not is a matter of absolute indifference to me."

Immediately the man in the bow began to blackguard Rex in a coarse and bullying manner, calling him a "sassy cub," and threatening to come ashore and give him a proper thrashing. He had a violent temper, and there were serious indications that he meant to attempt to execute his threat, when a small, wrinkled, rather oldish man in the middle of the canoe interposed.

"That'll do, Jed," he expostulated. "You started it, and you'd better stop it. If he says

he ain't seen Michaud, I reckon he ain't. You're goin' to be here a while, ain't you?" he asked, glancing at Kingdon. "Well, if you see anything of this fellow I'd be obliged if you'd let me know. My name's Winkler, and I own the store at Tobique. Night before last Michaud broke in there and robbed the till of close on to a hundred dollars. I ain't had nothin' against him so long as he stuck to poachin' and the like, but breakin' and enterin' and robbin' tills is different."

His small, bright, deep-set eyes snapped as he regarded the boy questioningly. Instinctively Rex liked him as much as he detested the blatant, loud-mouthed person, whose domineering manner had caused the lad to refrain from mentioning Starbuck's experience of the night before. For a moment he was tempted to tell Winkler about it, but realizing there was nothing in the affair that would help them locate the thief, and fancying the admission might lead the man called Jed to accuse him of attempted deception, and thus bring on further trouble, he refrained.

"Why, sure, Mr. Winkler," he said readily. "We'll be glad to help you out if we can give you any information that'll be of assistance. What's he look like?"

"You can't miss him," returned the older man. "He's got a mess of black whiskers and hair enough to stuff a mattress. He ain't much to look at, but he sure has got a sudden temper, and he don't stop at nothing. If you run across him and could manage to find out whereabouts in the woods he's hidin', that's all I'd ask. Wouldn't want you to take no chances by tryin' to capture him."

"Don't worry, they won't," sneered Jed. "If that young squirt seen Black Michaud comin' he wouldn't stop runnin' in a week."

Rex smiled. "Some people always judge others by themselves," he commented serenely.

This aroused the fellow again, and he was letting loose another volley of abuse when Winkler cut him short by advising him to "shut his trap and attend to business." Then the old man called out a cheery good-by and the canoe headed up the lake, leaving the boys watching its departure.

"Sweet tempered guy, that grouch in the bow," remarked Wrenshall presently.

"Sweet as a lemon!" agreed Kingdon with emphasis. "I admire nice, refined people of his stamp! Somehow, I couldn't seem to give him satisfaction by telling what Kent and Baudie ran

up against last night, though I haven't a reason in the world for shielding this Michaud. Who is Michaud, anyhow, Buck?"

Starbuck shrugged his shoulders. "A Canuck who's lived in these parts for years. I reckon the old man's right about his reputation. Everybody knows he shoots deer out of season and does a little smuggling on the side; but for all that, the game wardens and government inspectors are mighty careful to let him alone."

"Why?" asked Rex interestedly. "Are they afraid of being mistaken for a deer?"

"Don't guess again. They tell of two men trying at different times to get his scalp and never coming out of the woods again. They found what they supposed was one of them months afterward, and it's said there was a bullet hole in his skull. After that there was a decided cooling of enthusiasm, and the Canuck was let alone. I reckon they thought a doe now and then out of season wasn't worth risking their precious skins over."

"A ruffian like that——" began Wrenshall.

"Beeg lot of lies!" cut in Lebaude vehemently, his face flushed an angry crimson. "Jus' because he choose to leeve by heemself in the woods

and come not out to booze with the gang, they say all these stuff of him. What proof they have he shoot the men? I belief not a word of it. Jean Michaud he is not the man to shoot nobody in the back."

"Don't get so agitated about it," cautioned Kingdon. "How long have you been acquainted with this Michaud person?"

Lebaude turned his snapping black eyes on the speaker. "I do not have to be acquaint' to speak good word for heem. You forget he is my countryman."

"You'll have your hands full, Baudie, if you try to stand up for all the worthless Canucks in these parts," laughed Dick Wrenshall. "Seems to me this one is a pretty bad egg, and probably he deserves all they say about him. If a man steals one way he will another, and smuggling and poaching are no more than certain ways of——"

"Cut eet out!" snarled Lebaude in a sudden paroxysm of wrath. "You talk about what you know nothing of. Keep eet up and prit' soon I light on you——"

"Oh, come now!" protested Kingdon good-naturedly, laying a hand on the Canadian's arm.

"How foolish you are to fly up that way over a man you've never seen! Let's drop the subject and raid the commissary's supplies. Empty stomachs are making us all fretful and scrappy."

The suggestion awakened enthusiasm, and a raid was made immediately on the dunnage of the heavily laden canoe. For a few seconds Lebaude preserved his sullen humor. Then all at once his face cleared, and with a charming smile, he sprang to help in the work of carrying supplies up to the cabin. By the time two trips had been made he was his old good-humored self again.

"By the way, Baudie," said Starbuck as they gathered up some wood to replenish the fire, "how'd you come to call Michaud Jean? Is that his name?"

Lebaude turned a bland and smiling face upon his friend. "Did I call heem that?" he drawled carelessly. "Then mebbe it ees his name. Perhaps I hear it some place."

"Maybe you have," muttered Kent under his breath. "But it's rather funny that in all the times I've been up here, I never heard him called anything but Black Michaud."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FELLOW WHO WENT AWAY.

"You can't swim?" ejaculated Rex Kingdon in disapproving astonishment. "Why don't you wait till you raise whiskers before you learn? I see where my work's cut out for me, all right. Where are your tights?"

"I—I didn't bring any," stammered Nipper Ware nervously. "It won't be any use wasting your time, Rex. I can't learn—honest, I can't. It just isn't in me."

Seeing a skeptical expression in his friend's face, Nipper went on to point out an explanation of his infirmity, as he had come to consider it. When he had finished, Kingdon nodded understandingly.

"I see," he said, without a symptom of his habitual chaffing manner. "It's mighty hard lines, but there ought to be some way of getting around it. I'm going to help you. Get out of your duds, and we'll go over to the landing place, where the water's not more than eighteen

inches deep. You couldn't drown there if you tried to."

Nipper obeyed, but with reluctance that was apparent in each slow, dawdling movement.

"I don't see much good in swimming, anyhow," he objected as he fussed around over the usually simple task of undressing. "Most of the drowning accidents you read about happen to good swimmers."

"Who told you so much?" inquired Rex, one eyebrow lifted with an odd quirk. "How'd you acquire that interesting information?"

"Out of the papers," answered Ware, catching the sarcasm in his companion's voice. "And—oh, well, you hear about those things all the time."

"Maybe so, but it's guff just the same," Kingdon averred. "The trouble is that lots of fellows who can only about half swim think they are wonders, and start taking chances in the water. When something does happen through their making fools of themselves, the report goes out that another good swimmer has drowned."

"Still," persisted Nipper, talking to put off the dreaded moment, "I don't have to go in the water; I can keep away from it if——"

"Oh, yes, of course!" cut in Rex. "You could also keep off the ground by staying in bed all your life. Quit stalling, Nip, and shed the rest of those clothes. Some day you'll heap benisons—whatever they are—on my head for what I am making you do."

Unable to think of any further arguments, and also a little afraid of continuing to oppose his friend, the little fellow dropped his last garment and stepped reluctantly toward the beach.

"Hold up a bit," requested Rex as the unwilling pupil dabbled a toe in the water. "I want to get you wise to the strokes. Though most persons don't know it, a greenhorn really should get a pretty clear idea of the rudimentary movements of swimming before he goes into the water. (How'd I ever happen to think of that word rudimentary!) Flop face down on this boulder and do as I tell you."

Thankful for even this momentary respite, Nipper obeyed. He was not in the least slow mentally, and within half an hour he had mastered the movements of the simpler strokes. He actually showed interest in the lesson while it was conducted on dry land, but when the time came for practical application, his fears returned

and obsessed him again. Venturing into no more than eighteen inches of water was an unpleasant ordeal, and he was shaking with nervousness as he followed Kingdon into the shallows.

Rex didn't laugh or jeer, as many other fellows had done under similar conditions. He waited for Ware to come up, and then he placed one hand encouragingly on the youngster's bare shoulder.

"First thing, Nip," he said in a matter-of-fact manner, "I want you to remember that I'm not going to play any tricks on you. I'm not going to duck you; I won't let your chin go under water, or anything like that. So you can cut out thinking about it and put your mind altogether on following my instructions."

Nipper understood perfectly, yet, while there was considerable satisfaction in the knowledge that he could place complete confidence in his instructor, he still felt far from comfortable. His dread of the water was so deeply ingrained that it had become instinctive and almost beyond the power of control by reason. He knew he could not possibly drown, and he was not afraid of being ducked, yet the half hour which followed, with the possible exception of one experience in

a dentist's chair, was one of the most uncomfortable he had ever spent. When it was over he gave an unconscious sigh of relief that brought a momentary smile to Kingdon's lips.

"You'll get it all right in time, old fellow," Rex asserted reassuringly. "It's a matter of acquiring confidence, and almost as soon as you forget to be afraid you'll begin to learn. Wonder where Baudie is going all by himself?" he speculated, reaching the summit of the point from which the other fellows had been diving, and perceiving the French Canadian lad paddling away in a canoe.

"Fishing, I reckon," returned Jim Scott. "Don't believe he'll get much, though. They don't bite this time of day, do they?"

"Bite?" repeated Kingdon seriously. "Around here they do. The report is that they're so vicious in this lake you have to hide behind a tree to bait your hook. I'll beat you under water, Scotty."

"You will like fun!" retorted the challenged lad, whirling round and taking a fine running dive from the rock.

Kingdon was almost as swift, and both fellows shot beneath the surface, leaving Nipper to fol-

low their progress through the clear water with half envious, half shrinking gaze.

"My! I wish I could do that," Ware muttered as Scott came up blowing and spluttering.

Not for an instant did it occur to him that he ever could. He appreciated Kingdon's efforts in his behalf, but he felt that they were wasted—he could never conquer his gripping horror of the water. And perhaps, deep down in his heart, there was a touch of consoling pride in the feeling that he was the least bit different from other boys; that he was the possessor of more refined feelings, more high-strung nerves.

Having dried himself in the sun, Nipper got into his clothes and went up to the cabin to start dinner. The boys cooked in relays, and presently Wrenshall hustled in to take his share of the work. There was a nice mess of trout cleaned and ready to fry, and in half an hour they had served up a most appetizing meal that drew the others irresistibly from their various occupations and made them fall to without waiting for the still absent Lebaude.

"If he can't be on time for meals let him eat the leavings," said Wrenshall with a touch of temper. Since the flare-up of the previous day

he had been noticeably disagreeable toward the Canadian lad. "I don't know why anybody wants to start off half an hour before dinner, anyhow."

"We should worry and lose our appetites," laughed Kingdon. "It's his loss. What a mistake we made in getting this shack to camp in!" he went on, glancing at Starbuck. "It's corking, fellows. If Bruce Brigham only knew what he's missing, he'd be twice as sore because his scheme for coming with us fell through."

"Don't mention that sorehead," begged Starbuck. "He and Dell Vickers showed themselves up for a pair of dubs by trying to put you in bad when you first came to Ridgewood. I wonder if Bruce really thought we'd turn you down for the pleasure of their society?"

Rex shrugged his shoulders. "You might have got a lot more fun with them along, but it's too late now. You couldn't chase me back to Ridgewood with a loaded gun. Once I get into the woods it seems as if I never want to return to the enfeebling shackles of civilization. Didn't I say a whole mouthful then?"

"I wonder how a fellow would feel if he

couldn't go back?" said Jim Scott thoughtfully. "Would he be so crazy about it then?"

"Couldn't go back?" cried Dick Wrenshall. "What do you mean by that, Scotty? People don't have to stay in the woods if they don't want to."

"Don't they!" retorted Scotty impulsively. "That shows how much you know about it. My cousin——"

He paused, a slow flush tinging his face. The others looked at him in curious expectancy as his color deepened. Finally he squared his shoulders and threw back his head with an odd gesture of defiance.

"I don't know why I shouldn't speak of him," he said brusquely. "He did nothing to be ashamed of. He was in a bank down at Portland. About a year ago a package of bonds was stolen from the vaults and the blame was put on him. It was a bad case. He couldn't prove his innocence, and he ran away when he found they were going to arrest him. Detectives trailed him as far as Moosehead, and there every trace of him was lost. He went into the woods and never came out again as far as anybody knows. Lots of people think he made his way to Canada and

fled to some other country, but I've a notion that he never left the wilderness. I've often thought of him and wondered if he didn't get awful sick of roughing it, and want to get back home."

"I'll admit," said Kingdon at once, "that his case is different. I suppose a fellow would get a touch of what we classy people designate as ennui or nostalgia if he had to linger in the backwoods perforce. (In case anyone fails to grasp my fluent flow of language, I refer him to a handy work of reference by the late Noah Webster.) It's human nature to hate anything that's forced on one. What makes you so sure he's still in the woods, Scotty? Has any of your family heard from him since he hit the elevated spots?"

"Not a word; and the worst of it is that he doesn't have to stay away, if he only knew it. The real thief confessed two months ago, so now there's not a suspicion against Dan."

There were general exclamations of surprise and interest, and for some little time the singular and unpleasant situation of Dan Markham formed the subject of conversation. The majority did not agree with Scott. To them it seemed impossible that a man could remain hidden for a

whole year, even in the North Woods, when sought by efficient detectives.

"They'd have caught him inside of three months," asserted Wrenshall. "Everybody knows it's harder to hide in unsettled districts than in big cities. Take it from me, Jim, he's slipped away to Canada, and maybe disguised himself and sailed to Europe or South America."

"Then why hasn't he seen the stuff in the newspapers about the fellow confessing?" retorted Scott. "The papers made a big story of it."

Wrenshall pointed out how easy it was to miss any particular news item, especially in foreign countries where the home papers are few and far between; but Scotty stuck to his belief, and presently the discussion ended when they began making plans for the afternoon.

Some of the boys wished to fish, and their remarks on Lebaude's nerve in appropriating one of the two canoes for his own exclusive use betrayed annoyance. Three was the greatest number who could comfortably and safely fish from one craft, while two was even better. For a time it looked as if they would have to abandon the idea of doing any fishing, but Kingdon finally decided to go off by himself with his camera,

and Nipper, only too ready to seize any excuse that would keep him off the water, proposed to write a letter to be mailed from Tobique at the first opportunity. This left the others free to use the remaining canoe, and presently they departed, bragging of the sizeable catch they intended to bring back.

Ten minutes later Rex struck off through the woods carrying his camera, tripod, and several odd arrangements of springs and cord. With him the apparatus took the place of shotgun or rifle. He was too keen a naturalist not to find more satisfaction in the photograph of some wild creature obtained with difficulty and a display of patience, than in the head or horns or limp carcass of that same bird or animal when brought down by a bullet.

He was setting out on a reconnoitering expedition to look the ground over and discover its possibilities, but if the opportunity for a good picture arose he was not willing to let it pass. He did not look for such an opportunity, and his surprise at stumbling on fresh signs of deer was correspondingly great. He had walked, perhaps, three miles in a southwesterly direction before coming upon the tracks which led toward the

lake, and had been made by several animals. Rex examined them interestedly, regretting that he had not arrived a little sooner. Still studying the trail, which was almost like a beaten path, he walked a short distance toward the lake until, all at once, a sound from the other direction halted him, alert and listening.

He could hear the distant cracking of dead twigs, and even as he listened, his eyes, from force of habit, surveyed his surroundings and he speculated on the possibility of getting a snapshot picture of the unknown creature. When the crackling sounded again he moved hastily and silently behind some bushes. Here he set up the tripod with swift dexterity. It took but a moment, the camera being already screwed in place and the cord attached to the shutter. He had scarcely adjusted the apparatus and stepped still further back amid the undergrowth when he realized, with a little thrill of excitement, that the noise was not being made by a four-footed animal.

"Hanged if it isn't a man!" he muttered in disappointment. "And now I prefer a gun to a camera."

The sounds, growing plainer, were the steps

of someone walking briskly and without the least attempt at caution. One hand gripping the cord, Rex bent forward eagerly, peering through the leaves. He thought of Black Michaud and felt a queer little tickling sensation at the back of his neck. He thought, too, of Scotty's outlaw cousin, who might have penetrated to these out-of-the-way woods. What an odd trick of fate it would be to learn from the relative of whose proximity he was wholly ignorant that he was no longer a hunted man!

Suddenly a slim, dark figure pushed through the bushes to the open space on which the camera was focused. Involuntarily Rex pressed the bulb operating the noiseless shutter. Then he caught a glimpse of the other person's face and drew his breath with a swift intake of bewilderment.

The individual whose photograph he had just snapped was his own friend and campmate, Louis Lebaude!



Involuntarily Rex pressed the bulb operating the noiseless shutter.—*Page 78.*

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CABIN IN THE WOODS.

Kingdon smothered his first impulse to call after the departing lad. Baudie, hot-tempered and sensitive, might imagine he had been spied upon. Therefore, before shutting up his tripod and stepping forth from the bushes, Rex waited until the sound of footsteps died away.

There was something decidedly queer about the affair. To begin with, it had been odd enough for the Canadian lad, usually fond of fun and company, to slip away in the canoe without a word to anyone; and now here he was, almost a mile inland, coming out as if returning from some definite place to which he had gone with an equally definite purpose.

For several minutes Rex pondered. A glance at his watch showed that it was half past two. He had left camp before one, but his progress through the woods had been slow and leisurely, hampered as he was with the camera. He was sorry he had brought it. Presently he turned and

walked back along the trail until the spot was reached where he had first come upon it. Then he flung hesitation aside. Placing tripod and camera carefully against a big hemlock in such a position that he could not fail to see them on his return, he set out briskly along the route which Lebaude had evidently followed.

This was almost like a path, faintly defined to be sure, yet far easier to follow than a blind trail. At first it appeared not unlike a path worn by animals traveling to water, such as Rex had seen at various times in woods; but to the puzzled boy it seemed that there was no occasion for deer or any other creatures to pursue such a fixed course. The forest was comparatively open, with scattered herbage; and as if to show the futility of going to the lake for water, the path presently came to a sparkling stream, the bank of which it followed.

It was a beautiful little brook, rippling over mossy rocks and brushed by the tips of drooping ferns and trailing vines. Rex found delight in it, for to him the stream had as much character as many a human being. The forest, with its cool shadows and restful stillness, fascinated him. At first it was rather open, showing here

and there little glades full of tangled undergrowth. Overhead could be caught glimpses of the warm blue sky, across which lazily floated drifting clouds, thick and bunchy and soft looking, masses like downy feathers or fresh-picked cotton.

As he pushed on, however, the character of the scene changed slowly. Little by little the undergrowth became thinner and the trees pressed closer together, blotting out the glades and open spaces. Ere long these trees grew taller, straighter, more magnificent. Like columns rising grandly from a swept floor they towered upward, their interwoven branches making a thick canopy of green which shut out sunlight and sound in a manner almost uncanny. At rare intervals a golden flicker found some tiny opening in that almost impenetrable roof; it drifted slantwise athwart the huge rough trunks to make a quivering spot of warmth on the brown carpet of needles that covered the ground and muffled the sound of the lad's hurrying footsteps.

Presently Rex drew a long breath, almost a sigh. To him a forest of primeval pine was one of the most beautiful sights on earth, but enjoyment of its beauty was always tinged with

troubled apprehension. In government reservations only were these colossal giants really safe. Elsewhere greedy hands were sure, sooner or later, to stretch out in their direction—money-grubbing hands, deadly in their purpose.

More than once Rex had seen the havoc wrought by the ruthless methods of commercially minded lumbermen, and he could picture vividly the destruction a few months of such work would bring about in these splendid untouched forests. Those sturdy, serried ranks, which had battled valiantly against the storms and tempests of centuries, would give place to desolate “slashings” of endless stumps, splintered old trunks, lopped limbs and entangled branches. Here and there in the desolation a few trees would be left standing—weak, crooked specimens, rearing their misshapen heads above the general destruction like deformed sentinels—shivering, bending, breaking under the terrific force of winter storms, and slowly dying as if from loneliness.

Kingdon shivered a little and thrust the unpleasant picture from his mind. At least the calamity was not yet in sight, and he hoped that before that time came saner conservation meth-

ods of forestry would be in vogue among the lumbermen.

Through the dim, shadowy forest aisles, he advanced, his mind shifting again to the enigma which had brought him here. The trail was still clear and easy to follow, but presently it left the rippling stream and turned to the left, climbing a gradual slope that increased in steepness. Where was he going and what would he find at the end of the path? Rocks and boulders began to appear on either side. The pines, instead of becoming more sparse, seemed to crowd closer, muffling and veiling the light until it was a sort of twilight gloom. Rex was beginning to grow discouraged when suddenly he came round a mass of granite and found himself on the edge of a little cleared plateau that registered instantly on his mind an impression of the most depressing sort.

Before him, towering sheer and straight to an indefinite height, was the rocky shoulder of a mountain. It seemed almost to overhang the small clearing, and on every other side the great pines grew so thick that Rex almost doubted whether a single ray of sunlight ever penetrated to this shadowy spot.

The rocks were gray and lichen-covered. Gray-green moss coated the tree trunks, softening their ruggedness and giving them an added look of age. Underfoot, countless seasons of falling needles had spread a carpet of incredible thickness out of which protruded here and there gaunt bits of fallen branches, bleached silver gray with age.

It was all so still and so shadowy that Kingdon's first swift glance failed entirely to take in the hut. A slower and more searching look around showed it huddled close under the massive precipice, gray and blank and rugged as the rocks surrounding it on every side.

"What a place for anyone to live!" muttered the awe-struck boy.

A moment later he realized that, while someone might have lived there once, the place did not have the look of being occupied at present. It was constructed of stone and logs, all of which seemed to have turned a uniform color with the rocks behind. On the north side, a rude chimney rose a couple of feet above the flat, mossy roof, but no smoke issued from it.

A closer inspection showed that the hut had been built against the cliff, the face of which

formed one of the walls. A stout door was secured by a heavy hasp and padlock. Around the corner opposite the chimney a small square window was covered by a solid shutter. Rex tried it and found it quite immovable. Evidently the place was deserted. He had a feeling, somehow, that it had been deserted a long time, and wondered whether he might not have made a mistake in supposing Lebaude had ever come there.

A few seconds later he learned that he had not been mistaken. Out of the rocks, a few feet from the cabin, bubbled a clear spring—oozed would be the better word, for it came forth with a sluggish quiet which quite failed to disturb the stillness of the gloomy spot. It filled a small basin and around its rim grew a few delicate ferns and trailing green things. Amid this foliage Kingdon discovered a pearl-handled knife.

He recognized it before reading the initials engraved on the plate. Baudie had been here without a doubt. When he stooped to drink from the pool the knife had doubtless fallen from his pocket and remained unnoticed among the ferns.

But why had he come there? The question

obsessed Kingdon; he stood staring at the bauble in his hand. What had the Canadian lad expected to find in this gloomy fastness—or whom? Last of all, how had he made his way so easily into such a remote nook of the wilderness?

CHAPTER IX.

STILL MORE MYSTERY.

Rex might have continued asking himself questions he could not answer for some time, had he not chanced to glance at his watch and discover how late it was. Immediately he slipped the knife into a pocket and, without another moment's delay, left the glade and hurried down the slope. It was easier taking the down grade, but for all of that he had not started a minute too soon. In spite of an almost abnormal knack of finding his way through the woods, he had some trouble about recovering his camera in the gathering dusk, and did not reach the camp on the point until it was nearly pitch dark.

Of course supper was over, and the boys greeted him with a chorus of reproof, the severity of which was somewhat tempered by real anxiety that some of them had felt about him. He turned it all off in his light and facile manner and proceeded at once to hunt up food and satisfy an uncommonly sharp appetite. Yet, even while he

ate, he was covertly watching Lebaude, and it did not take long to observe that the high-spirited Canadian lad was distinctly sober and thoughtful.

"What sort of luck did you have, fellows?" suddenly inquired Rex as he was devouring his satisfactory supper. "I suppose you got a monster, Scotty—and then he slipped the hook?"

"A whale," declared Scott, who was noted for the size of the fish he didn't catch. "Biggest one in the lake, I'll bet. He was so heavy he took the hook right off the line."

"Now wasn't that a shame!" chuckled Rex. "How'd you make out, Baudie?"

Lebaude glanced up with a slight start, a rather bewildered look on his face. "Make out?" he repeated slowly. "Oh! You mean with ze feesh? I hav' ze mos' bad luck. I catch not one."

"You should have spit on your bait. Where'd you go?"

Lebaude shrugged. "Oh, down ze lake," he returned vaguely. "Likely I not fin' ze right grounds, yes?"

"Perhaps that was the reason," Kingdon said rather grimly.

Evidently Baudie meant to keep silent concerning that inexplicable inland digression. Presently Rex began to feel a trifle indignant at the lad's secretive attitude, not because of a desire to pry into another's private affairs, but they were on a pleasure trip in such friendly intimacy that he could imagine no situation or difficulty arising about which any one of them would not consult the others. It made him a bit uncomfortable to think it possible that Lebaude might be sneaking off alone into the woods, perhaps to hold communication with a person or persons of whom his comrades knew absolutely nothing.

It was this touch of indignation, coupled with the fact that the roll in his camera held only one unexposed film, that led Kingdon to snap his grouped chums soon after breakfast next morning, and then bring out his developing machine. He was curious to know what Lebaude would say when confronted with his photograph taken in the woods at least a mile from the lake after he had intimated, if not actually stated in so many words, that he had not left his canoe.

While the others busied themselves in various ways about the camp, Rex carried his developing

paraphernalia down to the lake, mixed the chemicals and proceeded to run the film through the machine. As soon as he took them out he saw that the exposures were all good, but it was not until they were in the fixing bath that he examined the particular picture about which he was so curious. As well as the others, that one was clear and distinct, even though it had been taken in the woods; for Rex had one of the finest lenses to be bought. His face lit up with a half smile, and then suddenly he bent his head and stared intently at the negative, his eyes full of puzzled curiosity.

The photograph was in profile, and as a likeness of Lebaude it was unmistakable. But it was not that which aroused Kingdon's interest; it was something the Canadian boy held in his hand. It seemed roughly oval with a regular dark edge almost like a frame, but in the film the flat, mottled surface was too indistinct to make anything of. To Rex it looked like a fair sized framed portrait photograph, but the possibility of Baudie's obtaining such a thing in the wilderness was so absurd that he laughed aloud.

"I'll have to wait and see how it looks in the

print," he murmured. "It's got me woozling, all right."

The strip of film was pinned against the back of the cabin to dry, and Rex joined the rest of the party. Two hours later, however, he went down to the lake again with printing frame and freshly dried films and made haste to gratify his curiosity. After exposing the negative he slid it into the developer and bent over to watch the detail flash up. For a moment or two he sat keenly scrutinizing, before his eyes widened in amazement.

"Now fan me!" he exclaimed aloud. "It is a picture—a woman's picture! Will you kindly inform me what Baudie was doing with a thing like that—up here?"

"What are you mumbling about, anyhow?" inquired a voice behind him. "Picture on the blink?"

Kingdon turned to see Kent Starbuck strolling toward him, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his khaki trousers. For an instant Rex hesitated. Then he came to a sudden decision.

"Were you around yesterday when Baudie showed up?" he asked.

Starbuck nodded. "I was up in front of the shack with the rest."

"Was he carrying anything?"

"What do you mean? He had his rod and landing net."

"He didn't have a picture? Your eagle eyes would have noticed a framed picture if he'd been toting it."

Starbuck grinned. "I seldom miss anything worth seeing. What's the joke, old man? I don't seem to get it."

"Here's something worth seeing," returned Kingdon, shaking the hypo from the print before he passed it to his friend. "What do you think of that? I snapped it yesterday afternoon about three miles south of camp."

Starbuck stared at it. "Why, it's Baudie!" he exclaimed. "I thought he was fishing. What's the—— Well, I'll be blistered! It's the picture of a woman, isn't it? Who is she, I wonder? And where do you s'pose he got it?"

"He couldn't have brought it from home with him?" questioned Kingdon.

"What for? With none of us bringing a single thing more than we absolutely had to, he'd hardly be lugging a framed picture that looks

at least ten inches the longest way. Besides, some of us would sure have spotted it before this. What's he say about it himself?"

"Haven't interviewed him." Kingdon's eyes ranged over to where Lebaude was rough-housing with Nipper Ware and Scott. "I think I will now, though. Baudie! Come over a second."

The Canadian lad glanced up, and, seeing Rex beckon, left the others and briskly crossed the rocks. He was gay and smiling, with no trace of his seriousness of the night before. Looking into the unsuspecting boy's laughing eyes, Rex was conscious of a sudden mild distaste for the self-imposed duty, and he couldn't help feeling that he was meddling with something that was none of his business. Had he been alone, he might have backed down; but with Starbuck present, he stiffened his resolution to carry the thing through.

"I've got a question that's giving me some pain, Baudie," he said carelessly, "and I want to fire it at you."

"Shoot," smiled the vivacious lad. "Let her come. I am charm' to answer anyt'ing."

"I'm sure you'll be. We've been wondering where you happened to pick up that picture you had yesterday."

As if he had been struck, Lebaude's face turned white, then flaming crimson. His lids fluttered nervously and drooped. His hands clenched.

"I—— What you mean by picture?" he stammered at last. "I got no—picture yesterday."

"Then you've got a case for libel against my camera," purred Kingdon suddenly handing him the damp print. "What's that in your hand, if it's not the framed photograph of a woman?"

Lebaude stared at the print for an instant before he flashed an indignant glance at Rex.

"You took this—yes?" he snapped angrily. "I fin' eet hard to believe." His lips curled, and there was an indignant glint in his black eyes. "How long since you turn yourself to a spy?"

It was Kingdon's turn to color faintly. "I did nothing of the sort," he protested. "I had my camera set up for what I fancied was a deer, and when you walked past I snapped you for a joke. I wondered what took you back into the woods to fish. When I developed this morning I saw the thing in your hand for the first time."

"I know not'ing of her," said Lebaude with stiff dignity.

"But surely," put in Starbuck abruptly, "a picture—in a frame——"

"Eet is not a picture," denied Lebaude temperishly. "How could she be? Where would I get it, a picture? I cut some birch-bark back in woods. Mebbe it ees what you make into a picture with your imagination."

He turned sharply and strode away, leaving the two boys gazing at each other questioningly. Kingdon retrieved the print which Baudie had scornfully tossed to the ground, and studied the details carefully. He was more than willing to give the Canadian lad the benefit of a doubt, but, try as he would, he could not doubt.

"If that's birch-bark, my hat's the roof of a nut factory," he said at last. "The mottled part of a piece of bark might chance to photograph like a picture, but I can't make that regular black edge look like anything but a frame."

"That's right," agreed Kent. "I'm afraid he's putting something over, though I'll be jiggered if I can see why."

For a moment Kingdon did not answer. He had turned slightly and was staring with odd intensity at a spot on the deep curving shore line to the south of their point.

"I suppose," he said at length somewhat absently, "that he doesn't want us to know any-

thing about it, that's all. Getting right down to brass tacks, it really isn't any of our business that——"

He paused an instant, his eyes narrowing, his whole face taking on an added touch of keenness. When he went on speaking it was in precisely the same tone he had used before, but the subject was quite different:

"You brought a pair of binoculars, didn't you, old man?"

"Yep," answered Starbuck. "I haven't seen them since we struck the cabin, but they must be in the dunnage somewhere. Want 'em?"

"Bring them out, but don't go off on a tear to get them," urged Kingdon quietly, picking up the printing frame and fussing with the catch. "Ramble away as if you had nothing special on your mind, and keep the glasses out of sight when you come back. I've got a crazy notion that there's someone down the shore near that big crooked oak who seems a lot interested in watching this camp."

CHAPTER X.

THE RIFLE SHOT.

A startled look flashed into Starbuck's face, but without comment, he nodded and strolled away toward the cabin. Rex watched him disappear into the log building. Then his gaze shifted to where Wrenshall and Scott were diving from the rocks with Nipper Ware looking on shiveringly, and to where Labaude was sitting a little apart sulkily staring out across the lake. A moment later, while seeming to examine the printing frame, Kingdon's eyes traveled swiftly along the shore-line to the spot where a gnarled old oak thrust its crown of bright green out of the mass of darker pine branches.

It was a good half-mile, and at first he could not see the dark figure which had caught his eye. Then he found it motionless close beside the tree trunk, the face, merely a blur of white in the distance, turned unmistakeably in the direction of the rocky point.

Impatiently Rex looked toward the cabin, but

there was no trace of Kent. Why couldn't he hurry a little? Kingdon frowned, unable to imagine what was detaining his friend. If he delayed much longer the mysterious person down the lake might slip out of sight without giving them a chance to get a fair look at him.

Unfortunately for Kingdon's peace of mind, it was at least five minutes before Starbuck issued hastily from the cabin and started on a run toward him. Apparently recollecting his friend's cautioning words, however, he quickly pulled up and covered the remainder of the distance at a leisurely stroll.

"Why didn't you take a little more time getting them?" Rex exclaimed with some tartness.

"They weren't where I looked at first," explained Starbuck. "I had to hunt around for them, and I found——"

"Spin it later," adjured Kingdon quickly. "The fellow will do a fadeaway if we don't look sharp. Hand over the glasses and step around in front of me so I can look down the lake over your shoulder. That's the way."

A moment later he uttered an exclamation of disappointment. The man had vanished behind a tree even as Rex got him focused with the

binoculars. The boy continued to watch in hopes of a reappearance, but after several minutes had elapsed without his patience being rewarded he lowered the glasses.

"He ducked, confound him!" he exclaimed. Then, becoming aware of an expression on Kent's face which seemed to denote that he was fairly bursting with information to impart, he invited: "You'd better let it pop if it hurts that bad. Please open the safety valve before you blow up."

"I found it while I was looking for the glasses," stated Starbuck not altogether coherently. "I remembered they'd been stuck away in somebody's dunnage; you know we had 'em out on the train. I thought Baudie had taken them, so I looked in his things. The glasses weren't there, but I found—the picture."

"Say you so?" exclaimed Kingdon sharply. "You mean——"

"I sure do," averred Starbuck. "It's the photograph of a woman in an oval black frame. There's not a doubt but it's the same. He lied, you see."

For an instant Rex did not speak. "I wish we hadn't made him," he said at last regretfully.

"We were poking our noses in, you know. Probably he has a good reason for keeping it to himself. Does she—er—look like any of his folks?"

"None I ever saw. She's rather pretty, and not so very old. I'm sure she can't be any relation to the aunt Baudie lives with. His mother and father are both dead, you know."

"Couldn't this be his mother's picture?" questioned Kingdon.

"It might, but where in time would he get it? I've been in Baudie's room often enough, and I never saw it before. She died before Baudie came to Ridgewood, in fact when he wasn't more than ten. He was so crazy about her that for a while, I remember, he was almost daffy and used to spend most of his time in the cemetery. Surely, if there were a photograph in existence, a chap like that would have had it long ago."

"Perhaps he did have it," said Rex. "Perhaps he kept it where no one else could see it. From what you say, it's even possible that he might have brought it along on this trip, except that I can't see what he was doing with it in the woods."

"Nor I," acknowledged Starbuck. "And how could he smuggle it into the dunnage without our

being wise? It's queer enough either way you look at it, but I should say——"

"Hi, you fellows!" yelled Wrenshall. "Stop your gassing and come in for a swim. It's getting late."

"And Nipper's just itching for his lesson, I see," laughed Rex as he straightened up and glanced over at Ware. "You didn't think for a minute I was going to deprive you of that pleasure, did you, old man?"

Nipper grinned in a sickly fashion. His fear of the water seemed even greater than ever, and, on seeing Kingdon so evidently occupied, he had allowed himself to hope that he might escape for that day, at least. Realizing that he would have to go through with the dreaded ordeal after all, he started to reply carelessly, but he was interrupted in a startling manner.

There was a sudden queer whining sound in the air, and something seemed to pass between Rex and Kent, striking a boulder with a vicious spat that was distinctly heard by all. Almost at the same moment came the sharp, whiplash crack of a rifle from somewhere to the south.

For a brief period the stillness was broken only by the distant echoes of the rifle shot. Then

each boy was suddenly galvanized to action. Nipper sat down abruptly behind a rock, and the two bathers dropped hastily into the water. Lebaude sprang up and moved swiftly across to where Starbuck, furiously angry, was searching the shore-line with snapping eyes.

Rex Kingdon had bestirred himself just a shade more quickly than any of the others. In a flash the binoculars were lifted to his eyes and focused on the gnarled oak down the shore. This time he did not miss his quarry. The man was there, standing close beside the tree trunk, his rifle in his hand, his face turned, as before, toward the point. The instant he saw the glass leveled on him he disappeared, but not before Rex had obtained a satisfactory look at him.

"Oh, Mr. Michaud!" exclaimed the boy triumphantly. He lowered the glass and turned quickly to Starbuck. "I suspected it before, and this time I caught him cold. The miserable Canuck! Think of him taking a pot shot at us!"

"How do you know eet was him who shoot?" interrupted Lebaude. "You have not see him fire."

"Didn't need to," retorted Kingdon. "The bullet came from that direction, didn't it? Well,

there aren't so many outlaws on this lake that we have to pick and choose. I saw Black Michaud through the glass as plainly as——"

"How do you know eet was Michaud you see?" cut in the Canadian lad, suddenly taking another tack. "Never in your life have you seen him."

"Winkler's description was sufficient, and this fellow answers to it all right." Rex paused an instant and his expression grew doggedly determined. "Anyhow," he went on steadily, "whether it's Michaud or not, we ought to get after him and teach him it isn't safe to go dropping bullets into this camp. What do you say, fellows?"

During the altercation with Lebaude, Wrenshall, Scott and Ware had appeared looking somewhat shamefaced. As Rex appealed to them there was an instant chorus of acquiescence, perhaps to make up in its heartiness for the first instinctive touch of panic that had sent them flying to cover.

"That's the stuff," exclaimed Kingdon briskly. "Hustle into your duds! We haven't any time to lose. I reckon we'd better start out ahead, and you can follow as soon as you've piled into something. In my opinion he's a big bluffer trying to

frighten us. Naturally he won't hang around down there, and it may be slow work trailing him. We'll take one of the canoes and beat it down there in a hurry."

Sincere in his belief that the man was bluffing, Rex showed no signs of fear, and the others however they felt, were ashamed to hesitate. Kingdon took a few brisk steps toward the landing place, and then stopped abruptly, glancing back at the flushed, angry face of the young Canadian.

"Coming, Baudie?" he asked in a pleasant, matter-of-fact tone in which there was no trace of irritation.

Lebaude hesitated for an instant. Then his jaw hardened and he shook his head vehemently. "No," he answered. "I have not'ing to do with eet. You will blame the man because he is—er—Canuck. Eet is no fair, an'——"

"Don't be ridiculous, Baudie," cut in Rex good-temperedly. "You know very well we'll do nothing of the sort. Whether he's Canuck or Yankee, he'd better try his target practice somewhere else, believe me!"

A moment longer he waited to see whether the boy's face showed signs of relaxing. When it

did not, he briskly walked on to the canoes, followed by Starbuck. Baudie's conduct puzzled him not a little. His constant bristling defense of the outlawed Canuck seemed too earnest to be caused merely by the fact that they were of the same race. Rex could not understand the lad's attitude, and, as he drove the canoe around the rocky point and down the lake, his forehead wrinkled in thoughtful perplexity.

It was not until they had almost reached the oak tree that a sudden startling possibility struck him with the tingling force of an electric shock. Baudie was interested in the man himself, and not the fact that he was a fellow countryman! Impossible as it might seem, there was some intimate connection between the boy and the Canuck outlaw. Swiftly on the heels of this came another illuminating idea: the hut against the mountain cliff belonged to Michaud. It was his refuge—the spot from which he defied the representatives of the law. It was probable that at this very moment the fellow was making his way to that refuge by the shortest possible route.

CHAPTER XI.

A STAGGERING DISCOVERY.

A moment later Rex put the light craft deftly alongside the shore and both boys leaped out. Under the oak a patch of ground was trampled smooth by the restless movement of moccasined feet, and Kingdon's eyes lit up at this confirmation of his theory. He stared eagerly around for a glimpse of an ejected brass shell, and even went down on his knees and searched through the brush, but to no avail.

"No use," he said aloud, springing to his feet. "That fellow's a thoroughbred coward, Kent, and if you've got the nerve to stick with me——"

"Try me," invited Kent, "and see if I'm a good sticker."

To Starbuck's surprise, instead of making the canoe fast and continuing the pursuit through the woods, Rex stepped back into the bobbing craft and picked up his paddle. From long experience with his chum, Kent had learned to ask no questions. He took his place and, headed

south again, did his part in making the canoe skim through the water, even though his mind was fairly bursting with curious speculations as to their destination.

It was some time before these were satisfied. Kingdon did not deliberately keep his friend in the dark, but being busy working out his plans and keeping an eye open for the spot on the shore where Baudie had landed the day before, he quite forgot that the other boy might have an interest in their movements. It was not until they had disembarked for the second time at a spot where a canoe had unmistakably landed within a short time that he remembered to tell Starbuck about his discovery of the hut and his belief that Michaud was now on his way there.

Thrilled with excitement, Kent asked a dozen questions and made almost as many suggestions. One idea—the possibility that Lebaude had stayed behind for the purpose of somehow warning the outlaw—had been floating about in Kingdon's brain for some minutes.

"I dare say he'd be quite willing to put him wise," he conceded; "but I don't just see how he's going to. He couldn't possibly get to the hut ahead of us."

"They might have arranged to meet some other place."

"This business wasn't prearranged. I don't believe Baudie's seen the fellow since we came, except, of course, for those few minutes in the canoe when neither of them knew each other. It's almost a sure thing he didn't get into the hut yesterday. Wait till you see the place."

It was plainly Kingdon's purpose to make sure without delay that the cabin in the woods was the hidden retreat of the dangerous wretch, an action that might lead them into no little peril; for if Black Michaud had fired on them once with murderous intent, he would scarcely hesitate to do so again. Of course, unarmed as they were, save with automatic pistols, even Rex, though notoriously reckless and headstrong at times, could hardly count on the possibility of capturing the outlaw immediately and turning him over to justice.

Once, as they hurried through the woods, having reached the path that followed the course of the laughing brook, Kent started to inquire what his companion's plans were; but remembering that, whatever he did, Kingdon usually came

out of an adventure with flying colors, Starbuck decided to trust him and remain silent.

And so they came at last to the edge of the desolate open space at the base of the mountain cliff where they crouched in concealment, gazing with searching eyes at the small hut squatting against the precipitous rocks. It appeared quite as lonely and deserted as it had the first time Kingdon's eyes discovered it.

"Nobody home, Rex," whispered Kent nervously, feeling himself slightly aquiver in spite of his efforts to remain cool and calm. "There's a padlock on the door, so there can't be anybody inside. What'll we do now?"

"I'd like to give the inside of that shack the once over," stated the other boy. "If we could take a look at it, we should be able to decide if it really is Michaud's rat hole. Then we could inform the authorities where to look for him."

"Dangerous business, old man. He might come and find us prying. In that case it would be g-o-o-d night. Likely he'd fix us so that, later, we'd ride at the head of long and silent processions."

But Kingdon's hot blood was leaping, and he entertained no idea of turning back without sat-

isfying his curiosity regarding the cabin. A more cautious lad might have been content to do so, not he.

"I'm going to lamp the inside of that place," he announced. "If you're shaky, you can stay here and keep watch. Let me know if you see or hear anything that makes it advisable for me to take a high dive for cover."

"Not I," said Starbuck stiffly. "When you saunter forth you'll find me Johnny at your elbow, but I'll keep my eyes and ears open just the same."

"Then we'll saunter. Come on."

Boys, like fools, sometimes rush in where angels fear to tread. In this case two of them did something that most men, knowing Michaud's reputation, would have hesitated over. Rising from concealment, they walked swiftly forward to the cabin.

To Rex it looked as if not a pine needle had been ruffled since his hasty departure yesterday afternoon. The door was as impenetrably closed, the window as blank and shuttered. Even the little heap of brown needles, drifted over the low sill, lay undisturbed. Neither of the boys could believe that anyone had crossed that thres-

hold in days, to say nothing of hours, and Rex began seriously to wonder whether he might not have been mistaken in thinking this was Michaud's refuge.

Suddenly Kingdon did something that made Starbuck jump and gasp; lifting his hand, he beat a resounding tattoo upon the door. Breathless, both lads listened.

When the echoes died away the succeeding stillness seemed more tense than before. Standing close by the rough planks, Rex had an odd impression that he could fairly feel someone moving softly behind them. It was a foolish fancy, he told himself, yet so real was it that he found one hand stealing toward the butt of his automatic. Far above the treetops a wheeling hawk called harshly, mockingly. There was no other sound. Kingdon turned suddenly on Starbuck.

"Lend me your knife, Kent," he requested. "I'm going in here if it takes a leg."

Starbuck, watchful and alert lest they should be surprised by Michaud, passed the knife over. Rex took it quickly, thrust the stout blade to the hilt under the padlock staple and pulled outward with a strong, steady pressure.

Slowly at first the staple gave, but the wood around it was more or less rotten, and presently it yielded suddenly. A kick from Rex burst the door open, and both boys crossed the threshold to glance swiftly around them with curiosity and, last of all, disappointment.

The place was empty, yet again Kingdon was conscious of a queer, uncanny sense of another person's presence. Staring around at the rude furnishings, he could have sworn that some one had recently been in the room. The notion was absurd, of course, and he began to grow a little vexed with himself. With the window still shuttered and the simple furniture presenting absolutely no hiding place, the fancy could be no more than a whimsey of his over-active brain.

There was a scrap of paper on the floor beside a roughly made table, and Rex bent and picked it up. Idly he glanced at it, and then caught his breath with a sharp gasp. It was the front of an envelope addressed to Louis Lebaude. Turning it swiftly, he gathered in a moment the meaning of the brief penciled note in French scrawled on the other side:

I have taken Mother's picture, which you promised to send me yet never did. Why

have you failed to write in all this time?
And why do you avoid me now? I shall
make another effort to see you to-morrow.
Please do not put any difficulties in my way.

Your affectionate,

LOUIS.

Kingdon's eyes widened with amazement, then he glanced back at the heading which, in his haste, he had passed over. "My dear Father," it ran. Rex could not believe the evidence of his senses. "Father!" he muttered under his breath. "Now fan me vigorously! Why, his father's dead!"

He glared at the paper, almost expecting to see the impossible words alter before his eyes, but it stared back at him with bewildering assurance. "My dear Father!" Commonplace under ordinary conditions, in this instance the phrase was bizarre, fantastic, incredible. Yet as he stared critically at the writing he realized that, in addition to the evidence of the envelope, Baudie's familiar scrawl was unmistakable.

CHAPTER XII.

THE NAME IN THE BOOK.

"Come out of your trance!" suddenly ejaculated Starbuck in the tone of one decidedly annoyed. "What's the matter with you, anyhow?"

Kingdon gave himself a slight shake. For a moment he had really forgotten his chum's presence. Without a word he handed over the scrap of paper which Kent snatched unceremoniously.

"French!" the latter exclaimed disgustedly the next instant. "I'm no good at that lingo. '*Mon cher père*' means my dear father, but that's as far as I can get without a dictionary. Whose dear father is it? And what's it got to do with Michaud?"

An odd expression flashed into Kingdon's eyes as he took the paper slowly from Starbuck's outstretched fingers. After all, what had it to do with Michaud? How did he know it was addressed to the outlaw Canuck? He had merely taken that for granted because of his belief that the hut belonged to the woodsman. All he could

be really certain of was that Baudie had left it here yesterday when he carried away the mysterious picture. There might be another man in the woods whom they had not yet seen or heard of.

Kingdon's head began to swim under the burden of this complexity. Fortunately, however, the strangest mystery of all was unobscured by doubts and possibilities; that Baudie should write to a father who had supposedly been dead for years was a sufficiently interesting fact, and Rex made haste to enlighten his companion.

At first Kent was incredulous. Almost immediately, however, he recalled the fact that the demise of the elder Lebaude had been established entirely by hearsay. The Canadian lad's mother had been brought to Ridgewood for burial, but of his father nothing was known save what the sister living in the little coast village had chosen to give out—and that, as Starbuck now remembered, had been little more than a simple statement of his death.

“Of course everybody believed it,” Starbuck concluded. “Now I recollect having seen Baudie one evening talking to a strange man at his mother's grave. I didn't think much of it at the

time. It was only a few months after Baudie first came to his aunt's. But I knew I'd never seen the man before, and never got a glimpse of him afterward."

"Did he have a black beard?"

"No, though he might have had a mustache. You don't think that Michaud is Baudie's father? How could he be? He's nothing but a rough Canuck woodsman—an outlaw at that; and you know what a well-mannered, refined chap Louis is."

"It doesn't seem right, I'll admit; but you never can tell. Suppose we take a look around and see if we can find anything to indicate who owns the shack."

Apparently both had forgotten the danger of Michaud suddenly putting in an appearance and bringing them to account for breaking into the cabin. The discovery of the mysterious missive had whetted their curiosity to a keen edge and dulled their sense of precaution at the same time.

Neither of them had examined the interior of the hut in detail, but now they lost no time in sizing up the furnishings, the most of which were of the rudest description. In a corner opposite the fireplace were two rough bunks, the upper

one showing signs of having been added after the first was built. There were also two chairs, a stool, the table, some shelves and pegs, and a small chest under the window. That was all, except several skins, some spread on the floor, some hanging against the walls. Almost the entire back wall of the hut was covered with two huge bearskins that had already excited Kingdon's admiration. But he quickly withdrew his rather envious glance, and turned his attention to the chest which seemed to be the only article in the room that promised possibilities.

It contained an assortment of fishing tackle, a soiled box of writing paper, and several books. Rex picked up one of the latter, glancing at the title. It was an odd volume of La Rochefoucauld's Maxims. With a murmur of astonishment at the incongruity of a woodsman's choice, the boy flicked back the cover and found written on the fly-leaf in a clear running hand, "*Jean Michaud Lebaude, Beaupre, Quebec.*"

"Once more," said Rex in a husky voice, "I would like to be fanned!"

Starbuck, staring over his shoulder, read the inscription and made a gurgling sound in his throat.

"I'm about to pass away myself!" he spluttered. "What do you reckon it means? Do you s'pose he could have committed a crime and been forced to hide in the woods like Scotty's cousin?"

"You have asked me a whole earfull," said Rex, replacing the book in the chest and closing the lid. "Something out of the way must have happened to send him off here to live in this wilderness after being accustomed to a different life."

Starbuck drew a long breath. "I'm spinning like a top," he declared. "Think of Baudie's father being alive—and this sort of a man!"

Kingdon had stepped over to where the big skins hung against the rear wall, and was admiring the larger one.

"I'd like to own this dandy," he muttered.

"Don't you think we'd better be rambling away into the wildwoods, old man?" asked Starbuck, peering forth from the open door. "The proprietor of this residence might take a notion to come home, you know."

"If he's Baudie's dad I'm not afraid of him," declared Kingdon. "I'm sure he didn't shoot at us intentionally, if he really knew Baudie was one of our bunch." He stretched out his hand

and absently stroked the thick hair of the splendid hide. "Poacher, outlaw, or whatever he is, being Baudie's father fixes it so that we'll have to——"

His voice trailed away in an absent-minded manner, as if he was not quite certain of what they ought to do, or else had become more interested in something else. Starbuck, still gazing forth from the door with apprehension that was not wholly relieved, presently became impatient for his friend to go on.

"Well," he questioned, "what are we going to do about it?"

There was no answer.

Kent turned, wondering, and his jaw dropped, an expression of bewilderment that was akin to fear overspreading his face. Save for himself the cabin was empty, Kingdon having vanished like an egg from a conjurer's hand.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SECRET PASSAGE.

Starbuck was so overcome with amazement that he was incapable of motion. His eyes took in the interior of the sparsely furnished hut in a single sweeping glance. Had Rex been in a mood for practical joking, there was nothing to afford him concealment in that small box-like room. Three of the walls were of solid logs, and two of them abutted against the solid rock. The huge bearskin, hanging against the latter wall, did not quite touch the floor, and Kent could clearly see a strip of dark stone below it.

"Eternal marvels!" he gasped in a tone of utter bewilderment. "I wonder whether he went through the floor or up the chimney?"

"Neither, you simp," chuckled Kingdon's voice with an unexpectedness which made Starbuck jump. "I went through the wall."

To Kent's further astonishment, the bearskin suddenly billowed out, and his chum's smiling face peered from behind it.

"Neatest little arrangement you ever saw," Rex commented. "Come look at it. I never would have suspected the thing if I hadn't pushed against the skin. Look here."

He raised the heavy hide, which was cleverly weighted by an iron bar to make it hang straight, and revealed to Starbuck an irregular cavity or passage leading, apparently, straight into the heart of the mountain. The bottom of this entrance was six or eight inches above the cabin floor, which accounted for the deceptive appearance of solid rock.

"Find a candle, old man," requested Kingdon. "We ought to take a look at this. I've a notion it's the way a person can go and come and still have the front door looking as if nobody had opened it in a hundred years."

Another fancy had come to him, which he kept to himself. Vividly he recalled that queer sense of someone's presence of which he had been so keenly conscious when they entered the cabin, and now he was almost positive that some person had been there at the time. Perhaps Michaud had managed to reach the refuge before them; perhaps when they entered he had slipped away

through the mysterious passage—if, indeed, he had slipped away at all.

For the first time, in spite of his natural impetuous rashness, Rex hesitated. Face to face with Michaud under ordinary conditions, he might be able to announce his peaceful intentions and declare himself Baudie's friend; but to encounter the hunted man in the darkness of that underground tunnel would be quite a different matter. Not one boy in a thousand, perhaps, would have ventured to penetrate the secret passage; possibly not more than one in ten thousand. But Kingdon was the exceptional one.

It was not exactly false pride that spurred him either, although he saw Starbuck, who had brought a lighted candle, looking at him with a queer questioning expression. He realized that they had perpetrated a piece of thoughtless folly in attempting to pursue the outlaw under such conditions, but the amazing discoveries they had made had fired his blood and filled him with a great eagerness to solve all the secrets of that remarkable refuge in the forest. The adventure was such a one as he had sometimes read about with feverish eagerness, and frequently dreamed of participating in. It seemed that to quit now

would be like getting "cold feet" after setting out boastfully upon a great enterprise.

And so, instructing Kent to keep close behind him and hold the candle high that the light might shine over his shoulder, he nerved himself to advance into the passage. Both lads moved forward with their hearts thumping loudly within them.

The tunnel went straight back into the rock for about twenty feet, and then turned abruptly to the left. It wasn't really a tunnel, but rather a cleft in the mountain formed by a section of the rock separating it from the principal mass. For a dozen yards or more it was probably covered by other rocks and débris clogging the narrow opening and gradually filling in above it. Then a thin streak of light appeared above, growing gradually wider, and they found themselves beginning to climb. It was a smooth, easy grade. Doubtless the man who lived in the cabin was to be thanked for that. When they finally emerged from the crevice they found themselves on a narrow shelf of rock, thirty feet or more above the forest level, at a point from which not even the cabin chimney could be seen.

"Well, that's a slick little back entrance," said

Starbuck, taking a long breath of relief. "It's the kind that ought to be mighty useful to a chap like Michaud. Wonder how you get down from here?"

"Use your eyes," advised Kingdon. "This dead tree is as nice a ladder as anybody'd want."

Whether or not the pine in question had fallen against the ledge of its own accord or been cleverly placed there by the occupant of the cabin, it could, as Rex stated, serve nicely as a ladder. The boys did not descend by it, but, after a brief look around, returned to the hut.

"I reckon it's up to us to fade gently away," remarked Rex as the bearskin dropped in place behind them. "Don't believe we'll find out anything more that's worth knowing. Let's fix up the staple and beat it."

Before this job was satisfactorily finished both lads were aware that they possessed nerves. In the interest of examining the cabin and the excitement of their discovery, they had lost track of time. It seemed to them that they had been there for hours, and they worked feverishly with the door, fearful that Michaud might appear at any moment and catch them. When it was finished, Rex dusted a double handful of pine

needles lightly across the threshold and turned quickly away.

In silence they hastily crossed the glade and were about to circle the jutting mass of rock around which curved the path, when the snapping of a twig on the other side brought them up sharp. For an instant they stood petrified. Then, like a flash, Kingdon gripped his chum's arm and dragged him down beside the boulder.

It wasn't much of a hiding place, and Baudie would have seen them had he not been occupied entirely in another direction. They crouched there, scarcely daring to breathe, and watched the Canadian boy hurry on and glance momentarily at the locked door of the hut. He swiftly crossed the glade and disappeared around a shoulder of the mountain beyond the spring. The moment he was out of sight the two boys whisked past the boulder and took the back trail at a run.

"Not a bit close!" said Kingdon softly. "He's going in by way of the tunnel. I hope we didn't leave any traces behind us. Somehow, I'd hate him to find out that we knew."

"I don't see why he should," returned Starbuck confidently. "We'll be back in camp before

he can get there. If we have to explain to him when he turns up, we'll do the best we can at it."

They were not put to the necessity of making explanations. Before they saw Lebaude again something quite unexpected had happened to divert the attention of everyone from the outlaw woodsman.

Wasting little breath in conversation, the two chums hurried through the woods toward the spot where they had left the canoe. They were nearly there when they came upon Wrenshall, Scott and Ware, all of whom showed keen eagerness, if not actual excitement. Rex naturally imagined this was because of their interest in the reckless pursuit, and he was surprised at the ease with which he was able to satisfy their curiosity. He had been prepared for a great deal of quizzing, but the trio did not even ask why he had made that sudden shift down the lake from the spot where Michaud had been standing.

"You took some chances, that was what worried us," commented Wrenshall almost indifferently. "So we tried to follow you." With much more briskness he continued: "You ought to

have stayed at the lake and piped what we did. Honest Injun, you couldn't guess what it was in a week."

"Then don't keep us in suspenders," entreated Kingdon. "Let it come if you've really discovered something worth while."

"I don't know what you call worth while," Wrenshall retorted tartly. "Seems to me a couple of strange canoes chasing the shore down by the narrows ought to be——"

"Let me get you, my dear fellow," interrupted Rex. "I've never yet seen a canoe chase the shore. Did they have much trouble catching it, or did it get away?"

Nipper snickered, and Wrenshall, who was of a somewhat serious turn of mind, frowned slightly. "I should have said they were chasing *along* the shore," he corrected with dignity. "As a matter of fact, one of them was chasing the other."

"Somebody's got 'em well trained," chuckled Kingdon, determined to keep the diversion up. "What a stunt it would be if we could capture those trick canoes and take them back to civilization! There'd be oodles of gold it in, believe me! Which way were they heading, Dickie?"

"Toward the narrows, I told you," rejoined Wrenshall snappishly. "They came out of a little cove over on the east shore and turned south. There were two paddlers in each canoe, and they went through the narrows into the river."

Kingdon turned to Starbuck with an expression of sorrowful regret. "I'd like to know how you account for this, Buck," he said in a pained tone. "My doctor orders me off to be quiet, and on the strength of your assertion that there isn't a human being to be seen on this part of the lake once a month, I come here. Since our arrival there've been hordes of strange people around, and I don't like it at all. It's too much like my trip to Virginia last winter for a change and rest—the railroads took my change and the hotels got the rest."

"How brilliant!" cried Scott, clapping his hand over his eyes. "And I didn't bring my smoked glasses."

"It isn't your eyes, old man," said Rex suavely. "Your trouble lies a trifle higher up."

"It's probably that same bunch from Tobique," was Starbuck's idea. "Maybe they've turned out a whole gang to run the Canucker down."

"Then we're likely to have the pleasure of see-

ing Winkler and the amiable Jed," drawled Rex. He hesitated, frowning slightly. "They went south into the river?" he questioned, glancing at Wrenshall.

"Yep."

"And didn't show up again?"

"Not that we could see. We watched fifteen or twenty minutes before we started to find you."

"Wish you'd stayed and kept on watching," said Rex; "but don't misconstrue me as criticizing. Your motives in following us were undoubtedly estimable—and that's a good word when one can think to use it. What do you say, Buck, if we slip across the lake and Sherlock Holmes around a bit?"

"I'm yours truly, Doctor Watson," agreed Starbuck. "Only don't forget that we haven't had any dinner yet."

"Forget it!" cried Rex, as they came out upon the lake shore. "I am vividly reminded of the fact by a yearning vacuum in the department of the interior. After we chase back to camp and get a bite, we'll shoot across the lake and see who's trespassing on our happy hunting grounds."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE OTHER PARTY.

Wrenshall was disposed to attach a great deal of importance to the appearance of the strange canoes, persisting in talking about them while the boys, having reached camp, were snatching a hasty bite.

"Oh, forget it for a minute," implored Rex. "Let that cold ham and hardtack stop your mouth. What's the good of doing so much guessing, old man?"

"Did you say guessing or gassing?" inquired Starbuck, grinning behind Dick's back.

"The words are synonymous in this case, and if you don't know what synonymous means I'll never be able to tell you."

"Didn't somebody tell us something about some lumbermen being around here?" persisted Wrenshall, refusing to be silenced.

"Do lumbermen chase the shore in canoes?" asked Nipper Ware, making a puerile attempt to

be funny. "They're big and husky, as a rule, and they ought to catch it if——"

"You'll catch it if you don't shut up!" flared Wrenshall, turning on the little chap, who promptly edged away toward the open back door.

"My!" muttered Scott. "How touchy he is!"

"You're to blame for the frivolous ways these fellows are getting into, Kingdon," charged Dick. "Can't any of them seem to be serious? They all try to ape you."

"If they ape me they'll probably make monkeys of themselves. Now, please don't everybody throw something at me! Such a pun deserves punishment, I know."

Wrenshall gave him a reproving look. "Sometimes," he said, "you amuse me, but this is not one of the occasions. It's a serious matter being fired at the way we were, and now if we're going to be pestered by a lot of strangers who have no business being around here——"

"You're talking nonsense yourself, Wren," declared Starbuck, rising from the table. "We don't own this lake, and other people have as much right around here as we have as long as they let us alone. Of course this Michaud busi-

ness is different—er—that is, we—we thought so.”

Having caught a warning glance from Kingdon, he floundered and stammered, aware that he had indiscreetly brought up a matter that might lead the others, under present conditions, to question them more closely about their late adventure in the woods. In order to repair the error, he began urging everybody to hurry up if they really meant to start out upon the investigating tour before it was too late to do so that day.

The boys were coming out of the cabin when Lebaude appeared. The Canadian youth gave Rex and Kent a searching look, but volunteered no explanation concerning where he had been. When he learned of their purpose, he was more than ready to join the expedition.

“You’d better duck inside and grab something to eat, Baudie,” suggested Starbuck. “We’ve had a hasty snatch.”

“Eet ees not hongry I be,” was the reply. “I do not care for the eating.”

Which was a bit singular considering the fact that Lebaude usually had a voracious appetite and a way of cleaning up the remnants whenever he missed a meal.

The party soon put off in the two canoes, Nipper Ware reluctantly taking his place with Kingdon and Starbuck. Until they were far out on the lake he continued to cast longing glances back toward the point on which the old camp stood.

"Come now, Nip," begged Kingdon suddenly, "cheer up and wipe that worried look off your map. You're not going to a watery grave for at least an hour and a quarter."

Crouching in the middle of the canoe, Ware gave a slight start and flushed deeply. He had not been conscious of how plainly his face betrayed the nervousness gripping him, and the discovery that Rex could read him like a printed page was embarrassing.

"I—I was thinking," he stammered, "of——"

"That's an awful bad habit when you're not used to it," laughed the boy in the stern. He paused and bent forward a bit, his face suddenly serious. "You don't mean to say that it's in your mind all the time?" he asked in a low tone. "Don't you ever forget it?"

Nipper's lids drooped and he plucked nervously at a jagged tear in his khaki trousers. "Well—

hardly ever," he confessed. "I try, but it doesn't seem to be much use."

"When you've caught the knack of swimming you'll realize how foolish you were to worry. It's almost as simple as walking, and one never forgets after he has learned. I'm going to give you another lesson as soon as we get back. Say, isn't that the cove just ahead there?"

Without moving his body, Ware cautiously turned his head and surveyed the shore. "I think so," he answered. "It looks like the place they shot out of. Dick saw them first. He'd know for sure."

Kingdon glanced back at the other canoe, wondering whether it was worth while waiting for them to come up. Deciding that it wasn't, he resumed paddling.

The character of the indentation in the shoreline which they were approaching was hidden by a thickly wooded point that protruded—though not nearly so boldly as their own camping ground—into the lake. It might be either a mere cove or the mouth of a creek or small river, and curiosity made Kingdon and Starbuck unconsciously speed up as they approached the end of the point. They were within a dozen yards of

the low sandy spit that extended a little from the thick screen of pines, scrub oak and underbrush when their ears were greeted with a cry in the nature of a warlike challenge.

"Come on, you dubs!" invited a harsh voice from somewhere close at hand. "If you want to get your blocks knocked off, sail right in. I'm waiting."

For a moment the boys thought the words were addressed to them and that the unknown was concealed somewhere in the thicket. But they quickly realized that the defiance came from the other side of the point. Another voice, either not raised so loud or from a greater distance, called back a retort that brought a sparkle into Kingdon's eyes.

"It's a scrap, Kent," he said in a low tone. "Hustle up, and we'll get front seats."

Rex thrust his paddle deep, and the canoe leaped forward, causing Nipper Ware to grasp nervously at the sides. Round the end of the point it swept, but the only reason that it did not stop was because of the acquired momentum. Both paddlers ceased their efforts with surprising suddenness and stared, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, at the scene before them.

As Rex had more than half expected, they had entered the outlet of a good-sized stream that widened as it emptied into the lake until the distance between banks must have measured over a hundred feet. On the left, amid the dark green of pine foliage, gleamed the white expanse of three tents. A newly built landing place of logs and rough saplings ran out a little way into the river. Several figures in swimming trunks sat on the end of it, dangling their feet in the water and watching the maneuver of two canoes in midstream.

It took a good deal to surprise Rex Kingdon, or rather, to force him to show it; but this was one of the rare occasions when he gave evidence of being utterly taken aback. Also Starbuck and Ware, their mouths agape, surveyed the scene almost with incredulity.

No wonder. Before rounding the point the last thing any of them had dreamed of beholding was the sight of such familiar faces. They had been prepared for Winkler, or the ill-tempered Jed, or even a crowd of bearded, raucous lumbermen; but to come suddenly upon a number of Ridgewood lads whom they had left at home less than a week before, with no idea of seeing any of

them again until they should return, was astounding.

Kingdon was the first to recover. His eyes swept over the group on the rickety little dock, recognizing Roddy Thorpe, Shrimp Ballard, Dudley Durand and fat Chub Taffinder, the last mentioned looking like a pink porpoise squeezed strainingly into scant bathing trunks and presenting a vivid contrast to Durand, who was slim, elegant and supercilious in his swagger swimming suit of woven silk. These were the passive figures in the scene. As usual, it was the active ones which interested Rex most, and he found them in the two canoes.

In the stern of one crouched Dell Vickers clad in bathing trunks and wielding a paddle skillfully. Once Vickers had attempted to connect Kingdon with a band of smugglers, thus bringing about strained relations between the two boys. Bruce Brigham, Vickers' particular chum, and likewise Rex's enemy, balanced himself in the bow of the same canoe, holding a long pole to the end of which a huge sponge was fastened. In the other canoe Tug Melchor was the paddler, while the "spear" was held by a big, sandy-haired chap of fine physique, whom Kingdon had

never seen, but whose voice, bellowing the challenge, had been heard through the screen of trees.

Rex had scarcely taken in these details—scarcely begun, even, to wonder who the stranger was—when a sudden shout went up from the group on the dock. It caused Brigham to turn his head swiftly, and his lips curled in a snarl as he beheld the new arrivals. Vickers' expression was even more disagreeable. But it was really the strange lad who started the next move. As he caught sight of the newcomers his eyes sparkled and his big mouth curved in a sudden delighted grin.

“Avast heavin’!” he bellowed, taking a fresh grip on his curious weapon. “For’ard, men, to repel boarders!”

Melchor seemed to catch his idea instantly, and he promptly turned the canoe and drove it toward the rival campers. Vickers, though a trifle slower of comprehension, was not very far behind. Almost before Rex and his friends could recover from their first astonishment they realized that unless they stirred themselves they would soon become targets for the deftly balanced sticks poised by the two lads who were rushing toward them.

At once Rex increased his speed without swerving aside. His eyes narrowed a bit as they studied the approaching canoemen. A fleeting glance, so cursory as to be almost negligible, showed him that Nipper had turned pale with fright and was gripping the sides of the canoe convulsively.

"Don't worry, Nip," he said in a low tone. "If we go over I'll look after you. Keep her going, Kent, but don't try to steer. Leave that to me."

Starbuck obeyed and they skimmed over the water, heading straight for the first craft as if they meant to cut it down. But Melchor and the auburn-haired unknown were game. They did not give way an inch, and Kingdon was obliged to swerve so sharply to the left that his canoe was almost overturned. As they swung away the stranger lunged with his soft tipped lance, but so abrupt was their maneuver that the sponge barely touched Kingdon's black jersey.

"Good work!" the spearsman cried generously. "That was some dodge. Around again, Tug. We'll have 'em in a jiffy."

At once Kingdon warmed toward the fellow, and at any other moment he would have sent

back a laughing response. Just now he had scarcely time to breathe. The second craft was barely twenty feet behind, coming at top speed. In the bow, his spear poised for a vicious stroke, his expression one of gloating certainty, Brigham half-crouched, half-stood.

With a wide sweep of his paddle, Rex again sent the canoe straight at the enemy. Brigham prepared to strike. His figure stiffened and his hand, holding the stout pole in a tight grip, drew back a little for the effort. In another second, it seemed, the sponge-tipped weapon would have been launched straight at Starbuck's chest had not Rex suddenly shifted the course and shot across the bow of the other canoe.

"Grab his stick, Kent!" Kingdon suddenly cried. "Yank it away from him!"

Dropping his paddle, Starbuck caught the end of Brigham's spear. Had the latter's brain been working properly, he would have promptly realized the futility of resistance. But Bruce was a trifle bewildered by the abruptness of Kingdon's maneuver and furious at its success.

He foolishly resisted, striving to keep his hold on the stick in order to prevent Starbuck from obtaining possession of it. The result was divert-

ing for the recent arrivals. Suddenly losing his balance, Bruce toppled from the craft and, with a loud splash, vanished beneath the water.

Instantly the canoe, relieved of one hundred and seventy odd pounds of bone and muscle, dropped at the stern. Vickers tried to save himself, but the canoe tipped and filled, dumping him out to keep his friend company.

CHAPTER XV.

A DUEL ON THE WATER.

Kingdon burst into a hearty laugh, but his amusement did not keep him inactive, even for a moment. The second canoe was coming at them, the auburn-haired giant balancing his pole deftly and shouting to Melchor to get up more steam. Rex's first impulse was to turn and meet them, but having glanced at Nipper's panic-stricken face, he headed for shore.

"Hi, there!" yelled the spearman in a disappointed voice. "Come back, you quitters."

Paying no attention to the taunt, Rex sent the canoe dancing over the water to a bit of shelving beach at the left of the dock.

"Hop out, Nip," he directed as the craft grounded. "Get rid of your pants and shoes, Kent," he went on rapidly, stepping quickly ashore.

Besides their swimming trunks, both boys wore jerseys, khaki trousers and sneakers. Having

shed the last two incumbrances in a hurry, they were ready for the fray.

"We'd make out better if you took this pole and let me paddle," was Starbuck's idea as they started to get back into the canoe. "I'm not much good at keeping my balance."

"And the man who invented the paddle had nothing on you," declared Rex. "All right. Let's shift, and we'll try to hand this roaring wild man a nice damp bath."

He picked up the spear as Kent took the paddle, and they lost no time in thrusting the canoe out toward midstream where their enemies were awaiting them. Brigham and Vickers were swimming slowly to shore with their overturned canoe, but neither Rex nor his chum wasted a glance on them. Their attention was entirely taken up with the interesting new game and the possibilities of out-maneuvering the big, red-haired stranger who balanced himself so easily in Tug Melchor's canoe. Rex liked his looks more and more, but he also realized that the fellow probably would prove a dangerous opponent. Evidently Starbuck was similarly affected, for his approach became so cautious that the unknown presently showed signs of impatience.

"Oh, come on and have at us!" he called good-naturedly. "We're going to eat you up anyhow, so you may as well come right out into deep water and get it over with. Delay only adds to our appetites."

"Aren't you sort of careless?" returned Rex. "You're liable to get a bad attack of indigestion, old sport."

"Not over anything soft, like you," laughed the other confidently. "Out at last! Go to it, Tug!"

Melchor obeyed, plying his paddle with force which brought out the rippling muscles of his arms and shoulders. His companion, half crouching and still grinning, poised his weapon for business.

"Give us the high gear, Kent," urged Rex in a low tone. "Don't try to keep too far away from them. It'll be no disgrace if we do go into the drink."

As the canoes swept toward each other, one of Kingdon's hands slid along the smooth pole until his hold on it was deceptively shortened. The other hand gripped close to the butt end.

Melchor's canoe came charging. In his eagerness to strike, the red-haired chap lunged too soon and almost overreached. As the fellow re-

covered his balance with an effort, Rex thrust at him with all his might; but the stranger twisted his big body to one side with surprising agility, letting the sponge-tipped lance slide harmlessly past his shoulder.

"Never touched me!" he jeered. "You're not such a much after all."

The canoes swung about and charged again. As before, Rex shortened his hold on the spear and shifted his feet a trifle until he had perfect balance. As the canoes came closer he saw that his opponent did not intend to repeat his mistake. Apparently he was holding himself back to get the full force of his blow, and the realization caused Rex suddenly to take the initiative. The two lances seemed to move simultaneously, but Kingdon's was a shade the swifter. It shot out accurately, propelled by the strength of his muscular arms, and the sponge, dripping with water, struck the big chap full in the chest and sent him overboard.

Melchor, more skillful or more lucky than Vickers, managed to keep from capsizing. Stopping the canoe's momentum, he swept the craft round as his discomfited comrade appeared, puffing and blowing and shaking the water from his

thick reddish hair. Rex watched the fellow with curious speculation, wondering whether he would lose his temper like Brigham and Vickers. As the big chap secured his lance and came on with an easy, powerful stroke, the thought flashed into Kingdon's mind that perhaps he meant to play some trick, such as upsetting their canoe. The stranger did catch hold of the prow, but it was to steady himself as he glanced up at Rex, his deeply tanned face showing no real resentment.

"That's one for you," he admitted, "but you can't repeat, my hearty. Come ahead, Tug, and take me aboard. I won't rest till I've squared the score."

"Then you're going to become exceedingly tired," averred Rex. "You'll have to sleep a week to get back to normal."

The other performed the extremely difficult stunt of climbing into the canoe from the water, going over one end as swiftly and easily as if he had been a featherweight instead of tipping the scales at a hundred and eighty or more. Then the canoes drew apart preparatory for another engagement.

When the clash came, though he did his best,

Kingdon failed to down the stranger; but he was successful in preserving his own equilibrium. The paddlers immediately did their part to put the spearmen at it again without delay, and there was little time for planning stratagems. With the thrust of the big chap's spear, Rex twisted his body aside, as he had done before. The sponge slid past, but even as he was congratulating himself on having successfully escaped again, the other canoe suddenly swerved, pressing the rod hard against Kingdon's body, already precariously balanced. His effort to maintain his equilibrium was hopeless; he was swept off his feet and pitched headlong into the water.

Coming up, he was aware for the first time that they had maneuvered rather close to the landing place on which the spectators were laughing and cheering for the victor. Above the shriller voices of the others Bruce Brigham's sneering tones sounded distinctly in Kingdon's ears:

"It's a cinch, Red! That web-footed dub's a shine at this game."

"He is, eh?" retorted the big chap as Rex swam to his own canoe and climbed in. "He dumped you and Vick into the wet about as easy

as anything I ever saw. Well, we're even, old top," he called, turning to Kingdon. "How about one more go to decide the championship?"

"You're on," accepted Rex readily. "As many as you say. It's more fun than I've had since I was in Rattan."

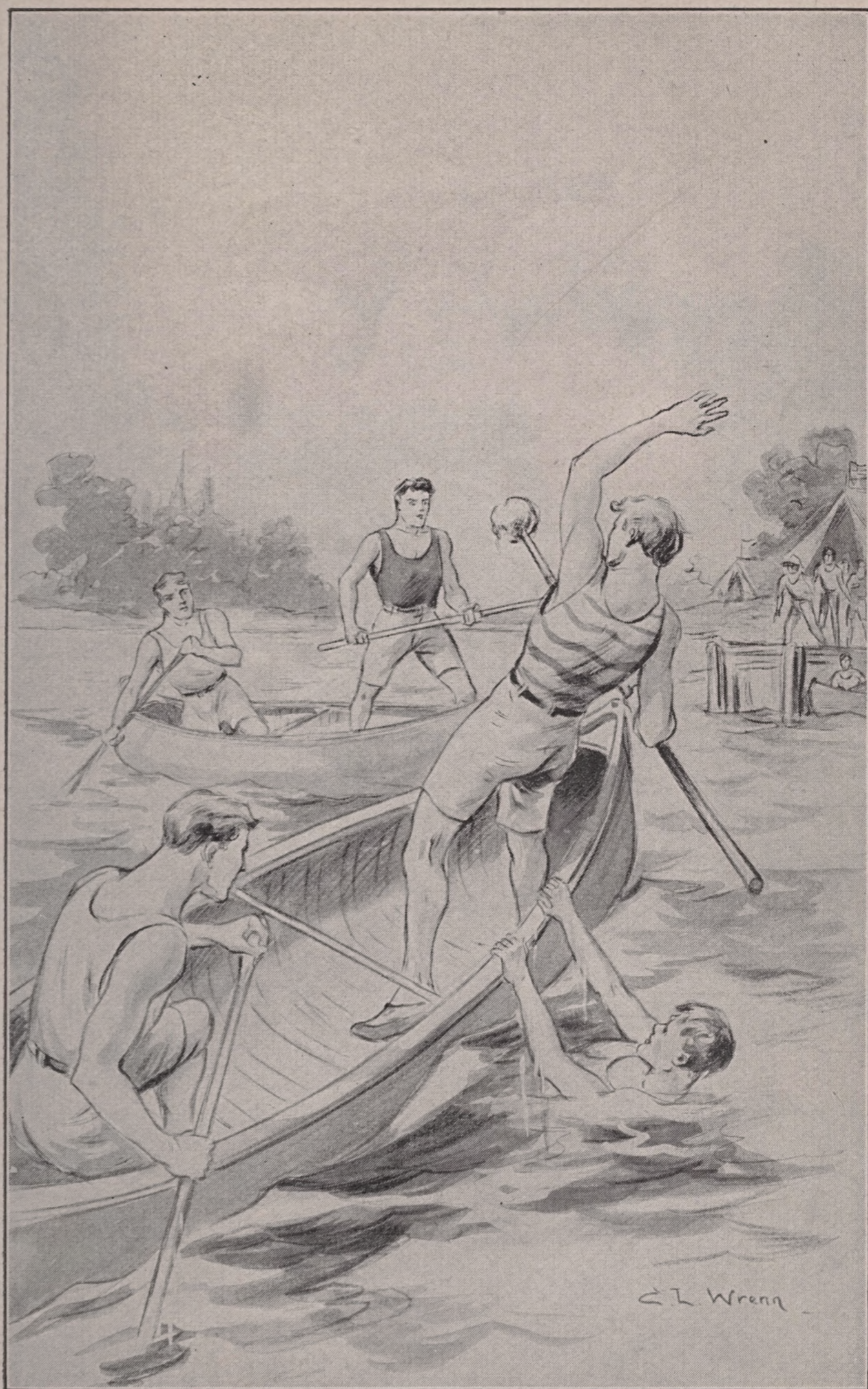
The canoes drew away to take room for the charge. Rex saw that Wrenshall, Lebaude and Scotty, having paddled up to the dock, were watching the sport. Nipper, letting his interest get the better of his fears for once, had advanced to the end of the planking and was standing with the owners of the camp. Vickers sat sullenly in his canoe, while Brigham, who was one of the most expert swimmers of the crowd, paddled about idly in the water.

With a single glance Rex took this all in before the signal to charge brought his attention back to the business in hand. The two canoes were maneuvered as before, both spearmen holding their weapons in readiness. They were still a dozen feet apart when Rex became aware of a sudden clamor from shore:

"Hi, there! Look out for yourself!"

"Look out, Rex! Brig's going to do you dirt!"

"Off your starboard bow, old man!"



"Look out, Rex! Brig's going to do you dirt!"—Page 148.

Before Kingdon had time to look for the cause of the warnings, a head suddenly shot up beside the canoe and a muscular hand gripped the edge of the craft. Rex barely recognized Brigham, his eyes gleaming with malicious triumph, when another hand joined the first and a sharp surge capsized the canoe in a twinkling.

CHAPTER XVI.

PHILLIPS OF WALCOTT HALL.

Having realized in a flash that he was doomed to go over, Kingdon dived cleverly, turning while under water and swimming back to where a gleaming shadow indicated the presence of a body floating on the surface.

This was Bruce Brigham, who was deriving the most side-splitting amusement from the discomfiture of his enemies. He was still letting out raucous yawps of mirth when, all at once, to the amazement of the onlookers, he flung up his arms, yelled wildly, and disappeared from view.

Before the crowd had time to be alarmed, Rex Kingdon shot up out of the water as if propelled by a springboard. Then Brigham's head appeared, and it was seen that Rex was fairly astride his broad back, having fastened both hands in Bruce's rather long hair.

"Bronco busting is my favorite parlor sport," Kingdon declared. "I'll guarantee to ride this one without saddle or bridle."

Sputtering and kicking, Brigham was forced under once more. When he came up again, having recovered from the first shock of surprise, he began a furious struggle to break away from the impudent fellow who was humiliating him. He turned and twisted and shook himself, but with small success. Rex clung to him like a leech. Again and again the big chap went under, but each time he came up the boy he hated had him by the hair and was astride his back.

"He pitches like a real bronco," Rex cried gleefully, "but he'll quiet down and take it easier in a minute."

The emotions of those witnessing this strange spectacle were varied, but mirth seemed to predominate. After it was seen that Rex made no attempt to keep Brigham's head under and that Bruce was in no real danger, even the latter's own friends joined to some extent in the merriment of the boys from across the lake. The red-haired chap in Melchor's canoe was most diverted, laughing uproariously every now and then.

"Bronco buster is your middle name, old top," he declared. "You've got the art down to a fine point, and you're a wiz."

Brigham's lack of popularity was never more effectually demonstrated. In that crowd of a dozen boys, Dell Vickers was the only one to move in his defense, and for a time he did not do that, but instead kept urging the others to go to Bruce's rescue. When it became plain that no one meant to follow his advice, he got into action and paddled out toward the struggling lads. Seeing the fellow coming, Rex kept on the alert. Not until the craft was alongside and Dell had raised his paddle for a vicious blow did Brigham's tormentor seek to protect himself. Releasing his grip on Brigham's hair, but still keeping his legs twisted around the boy's body, he grasped the canoe and capsized it. As Vickers tumbled out Rex caught him by the back of the neck and forced him under.

"The more the merrier," he spluttered. "If anybody else wants some of this medicine let him wade right in."

By this time Brigham was so thoroughly done up that he was no longer formidable, and Rex gave his full attention to Vickers while Bruce swam heavily toward the shore. Dell was quickly "cured" and soon was begging whenever he could.

"Hadn't you better send him to the stable, too?" suggested the highly amused stranger. "There isn't another buck left in that bronco."

Rex was ready to let up, and he found himself compelled to assist Dell to reach shallow water from which he could wade ashore. The fellow seemed completely conquered. Brigham, who had regained his breath and some of his courage, stood on the bank shaking his fist at the triumphant lad.

"You wait!" he snarled. "You just wait! I'll get square for this if it takes from now till Christmas. If it hadn't been for a—er—cramp, you'd never——"

"Go chase yourself!" cut in the red-haired chap contemptuously. "Own up that you got yours good and proper. You got stung. Don't squeal about cramps."

White with rage, Brigham, followed by Dell Vickers, gave the speaker a resentful glare before turning and walking toward one of the tents. When the worthy pair had disappeared, the big fellow looked quizzically down at Kingdon, who was floating nearby, keeping himself up by an occasional slight movement of his hands.

"Two bum sports, that's what they are," said the stranger. "You're different. I'll bet a dollar you're Rex Kingdon."

"You've got my number," confessed Rex in surprise. "I've never seen you before that I know of."

"Likely not, but I've been listening to the boys talk you over, and I put you down for Kingdon as soon as I spotted you. My name's Larry Phillips. Maybe you've heard Chub speak of me."

A gleam of interest flashed into Kingdon's eyes, for this chap was the wonderful cousin of whom Chub Taffinder had prated until most of the high school boys were sick of hearing his name. This was Phillips, of Walcott Hall, the famous prep school that was the goal of nearly every Ridgewood boy who looked forward to a college education. No wonder, thought Rex, that he had liked this athletic youth who could play fair and give an honorable antagonist a square show in a clash. He recalled the fact that Phillips had been fullback on the school eleven, stroke of the crew, and held many other important positions in Walcott athletics.

"I'm glad to know you," Kingdon said quietly.

"Chub has mentioned you once or twice. Guess he didn't lie about you, either."

"I'll race you to the dock," challenged Phillips suddenly.

Without waiting for Kingdon's acceptance, he dove from the canoe—no easy feat—and made for the landing with a swift crawl stroke. Rex followed, but the start he had obtained was sufficient to enable the red-haired chap to reach the goal six or eight feet in advance.

"Cutting out the lead I got by diving, that was pretty close to a tie," he admitted. "You're a real poor swimmer, aren't you?"

"Hardly paddle around," returned Kingdon, swinging himself up on the float.

He was more than curious to learn why this second party from Ridgewood had come up into the woods, and presently his desire was gratified. The very day after the departure of Rex and his companions, Phillips had arrived for a short visit with his relatives. On hearing about the camping expedition, he promptly suggested that the example should be followed and a rival camp established on the same lake. Brigham and Vickers, who had dropped out of the other party because of their dislike and jealousy toward

Kingdon, eagerly agreed with the proposal. Parents who had refused to let their sons go with the first expedition were persuaded to entrust them to Phillips' chaperonage, and before twenty-four hours elapsed the party was on its way.

"I proposed coming over yesterday and calling on you," stated the red-haired chap in conclusion, "but Brigham and Vickers balked. They're sort of in love with you, aren't they?"

"Not to the extent that we kiss in public," replied Rex. "Sometimes I shed bitter tears to think what dear friends we might be—and aren't; but the most of the time I'm resigned. Choosing enemies is really an art, you know. If you're going to have 'em, you might as well pick out the interesting sort. Well, I reckon it's about time for us to be hiking, fellows."

"What's your rush?" protested Phillips as Kingdon stood up, followed by the rest of the party.

"Got to get back and cook supper. It's my turn to demonstrate the fine points of the culinary art."

"Is that all? I know an easy way out of that. Stay here for supper."

Rex raised his eyebrows. "Here—the whole

bunch of us? My dear fellow, you've never seen us eat."

"Don't worry. We've got plenty of grub, and I'll make your crowd do their share of the work, all right. Come on, stay for supper and spend the night. To-morrow we'll come over and visit your ranch. How about it, fellows?"

There was an instant chorus of agreement from the other members of Phillips' camping party. Aside from Brigham and Vickers, who still sulked in one of the tents, they were all admirers of Kingdon. Rex glanced round at his own friends, and saw nothing but approval and acquiescence on every face.

"Looks as if the vote to accept was unanimous," he admitted. "I hope you haven't asked us just out of politeness."

"Politeness be blowed!" cried Phillips in great satisfaction. "While the armistice is in force we'll try to enjoy the cooing of the gentle dove of peace."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FELLOW WHO PLOTTED.

Preparations for supper, and the meal itself, proceeded in a gale of merriment. Brigham and Vickers kept aloof, to be sure, but Rex had resolved to pay no attention to their grouchiness, and therefore his enjoyment was not in the least affected. After the meal was disposed of, and the dishes washed, a big fire was built on the slope in front of the tents, and the boys gathered around loungingly. Melchor, shellacking a flyrod that had become watersoaked, was the only industrious one of the party.

"This is the way I enjoy working," drawled Kingdon, stretching his slim length luxuriously to the blaze. "I've been thinking how odd it is we didn't get a glimpse of you before this morning. You were here all day yesterday, weren't you?"

"Right here," affirmed Phillips; "but we spent all our time putting the camp in shape. How did

you come to see us this morning? I thought your place was 'way up the lake."

"Not so very far," returned Rex. "We happened to be down this way when two of your canoes came out and went down through the narrows toward the river."

"Oh!" laughed Phillips. "That was Dell and Brig and Tug and I doing our thrilling act entitled 'Flirting with Doom'—said doom being, in this case, the cute little waterfall down the river."

"Jiminy!" exclaimed Nipper Ware in an awed tone. "You don't go down over it, do you? It's a forty-foot drop, at least."

"Not being impatient for a hurried jump into the next world," answered Phillips, "we don't go quite that far. The game is to see which of us can come the closest to the falls in a canoe. Tug and I have beaten Brig and Dell twice running, and it's getting to be a bit monotonous."

"Is that so?" sniffed Vickers, sitting with Bringham somewhat apart from the main group. "Well, Kingdon's such a wonderful athlete and so nervy, why don't you try him at it?"

"I don't know," murmured the red-haired chap doubtfully. "We've been there and got wise to

the currents, but it might be too risky for a stranger."

"Reckon it would, for *this* stranger," sneered Vickers. "Some people are great bluffers, but when it comes to doing——"

"Don't talk about bluff, Vickers," drawled Rex with a slight touch of annoyance. "At a distance you look like the Hudson Palisades, but at short range you're about as solid as a thin fog." He turned to Phillips. "I'll make a suggestion. Why not get up a regular free-for-all affair, with everybody entering? Buck and I can man one of our canoes, Wren and Baudie the other. With your two, we'd have quite a list of entries—unless, of course, Vickers doesn't feel like taking part."

The delicate emphasis on the last words brought a flush of anger into Vickers' face and a hot denial to his lips. The proposition met with an enthusiastic reception, and Phillips proceeded to plan the affair.

"Stop fussing with that old rod and come over here, Tug," he called to Melchor. "We've got something on hand that's more exciting than fishing."

"One more dab and it's done," returned Tug, laying on a last brushful of shellac.

Gathering up brush and can, he carried them to a shelf that had been made between two trees, carefully put away the section of rod he had been operating on, and joined the others by the fire.

The remaining time until the early retiring hour was spent in an interested discussion of the proposed "test of nerve." Currents and their direction and strength formed a topic. Phillips and Tug told how close they had ventured to the falls, and predicted that no one would dare go further. Before dark the crowd went down to the dock to inspect Kingdon's canoe and paddles, and Rex discovered that only one of the latter was in the craft.

"Say, Kent," he called, "what about the paddle you dropped when you grabbed Brig's spear? I don't believe——"

"Here it is," said Wrenshall, bending over the other canoe. "We found it floating, and salvaged it."

Phillips took the paddle from Wrenshall's hands, ran his fingers over its smooth length and balanced it carefully.

"Nice one," he commented, handing it to the owner. "That'll carry you through and stand most any amount of strain—all you'll ever put on it, at least."

They returned to the fire and resumed their discussion, in which all joined save one. As the talk and planning progressed even Vickers, little by little, allowed his interest in the coming event to overshadow his hatred for Kingdon. He kept moving a little closer to the crowd in order that he might miss nothing, and so Brigham was left noticeably alone, a solitary, silent figure outside the circle of his companions.

If Bruce noticed his isolation, or was at all troubled thereby, he did not show it. Leaning against the rough trunk of a big hemlock, his arms folded, his canvas hat pulled down over his eyes, he seemed so still that one or two of the boys, glancing at him, imagined he had gone to sleep.

But sleep had never been further from Bruce Brigham's eyes. His smoldering rage kept his brain alert and keenly active. From the moment of taking that position one question, and one question only, had filled his mind: How could he get even with Rex Kingdon? How could

he properly retaliate upon the fellow who had humiliated him?

From beneath the drooping hat brim he watched the laughing youth he regarded as an enemy, his eyes full of a gleam of mingled hatred and perplexity. The answer to the question that troubled him did not come readily. The normal boy with a grudge, if the provocation is strong enough, usually brings about a physical encounter; but with discouraging clearness, Bruce remembered Kingdon's athletic début at Ridgewood High School, when, in a single afternoon, the newcomer had twice pinned Tug Melchor's shoulders to the wrestling mat and then practically knocked out Kent Starbuck with boxing gloves. Bruce knew himself to be inferior in skill to either of those fellows, and therefore he would have no chance at all in a fight. He must devise some other method of revenge.

Although his mind was thus engaged, he listened to every word spoken by the group at the fire, and when they went down to the float, he watched their movements closely and saw Phillips take up one of Kingdon's paddles and pass his hand over the varnished surface. Suddenly he smothered an exclamation of triumph.

Twilight engulfed the camp, yet during the bustle of settling for the night, sharing of blankets and rearranging beds, no one gave any attention to the sullen fellow beneath the hemlock or cared much what he was doing. Finally, however, Vickers observed that he had risen and was lounging indolently against one of the trees supporting the rough shelves that had been put up to keep certain articles on. A moment or two later Dell was puzzled by losing sight of his crony completely. It was not until Vickers was ready for bed that Brigham suddenly reappeared and, without comment, began to arrange his blankets on the ground outside the tent flap.

"I say," cried Vickers in surprise, "how long since you caught the fresh air bug?"

"It's too hot to sleep inside," retorted Brigham shortly.

"Hot!" sniffed Dell. "It's not near so hot as last night—and you didn't have any kick coming then."

"Well, it's too hot to-night," snapped the other in a tone that shut up the voluble Vickers.

From his bed on some fragrant—but not too soft—pine boughs, just within the entrance of the large tent, the flap of which was raised, hear-

ing this brief dialogue, Rex smiled a bit at Brigham's childish ill temper. Healthily tired, and with a clear conscience, he quickly dropped off to sleep; but later he was half roused to consciousness by a sound that either came from a considerable distance or was a very slight noise at hand. After listening sleepily for a few moments, he shifted his position to a more comfortable one and wooed slumber again.

Had he suspected for a moment the cause of that sound or the purpose of the person who made it, slumber would not have resealed his eyelids so quickly, nor would he have slept so peacefully through the hours of darkness—and ill doing.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RESULT.

Breakfast next morning was a hurried affair, and, as soon as possible, there was a general rush toward the landing place. About halfway down the slope Rex, bringing up the rear with Phillips, was amused to see Starbuck trip and plunge headlong. Instead of springing up with his usual impetuosity, however, Kent rose slowly, holding one hand with the other. Several boys gathered around him, and the sound of their voices, uttering commiserations, reached Kingdon's ears. A moment later Rex pushed his way to his chum's side and gazed in dismay at a wide, deep cut in the fleshy part of Starbuck's palm, from which the blood flowed freely.

"How the deuce did you do that?" Kingdon cried in dismay.

"Bottle!" snapped Starbuck, kicking viciously at a chunk of broken glass which had lain hidden in the grass. "Nice thing for anybody to toss

down there! I'm afraid I'm out of the race, fellows."

"That's what you are!" ejaculated Phillips, who had come up. "You won't be able to hold a paddle for a week or more. Here, Chub, beat it back and bring the Red Cross kit."

Taffinder departed on a panting run, and Starbuck, holding the edges of the cut together as best he could, looked sadly at Rex.

"Can you beat it?" he inquired in a tone of rueful annoyance. "I don't give a whoop for the old cut, but I did want to take part in this frolic. What will you do, anyhow, old man? Everyone's paired off, and there's nobody left to take my place."

"I'm a dub at paddling," put in Scott promptly, "but if I can help out——"

He paused as Dell Vickers, his face set in lines of disgust and disappointment, hurried up.

"Here's a nice mess!" Dell exclaimed crossly. "Bruce is sick and can't go."

"Sick!" echoed Phillips in surprise. "What's the matter with him? He was all right at breakfast."

"He feels dizzy and his head aches. He says he thought it would pass off, so he didn't speak

about it before. It's worse, and he took some medicine and is lying down in the tent. I wish it might have held off for a few hours. Here I'm left with no one to help me out—unless you go, Dud," he concluded as a sort of afterthought, glancing at Durand.

The latter promptly shook his head. "No, thanks. You don't get me to take part in this crazy business. I've got more regard for my life."

Vickers sniffed, and his gaze wandered hopelessly over the faces of the others. He seemed genuinely disappointed, and Rex, who had been watching him closely, was seized with a sudden impulse.

"I reckon you and I will have to hook up together, Vickers," he said invitingly. "Kent's cut his hand and can't go, so I'm left without a partner. How does it hit you?"

Vickers turned and stared at the speaker in frowning amazement. "Go with *you!*" he exclaimed. "Why, I wanted to beat——" He broke off, coloring a little and biting his lip.

Kingdon laughed lightly. "You can try that some other time. Suppose we see what it's like pulling together to-day. I've a notion we can

beat Phillips and Tug—unless, of course, you'd rather not go at all."

For a moment Dell hesitated, struggling against his dislike for the chap who had made the proposition. If he refused the latter's offer he was certain some of the fellows would say he was afraid, in spite of the fact that canoeing was one of the few athletic sports at which he excelled.

"All right," he agreed at last, "I'll go."

Phillips was dressing Starbuck's hand and, with assistance, he soon completed the job. Then Rex led the way to the landing place, where he gave Vickers the choice, and the latter took the stern of the canoe. The contestants lost no further time in getting away. The nonparticipants, now including Starbuck, all anxious to watch the exciting affair, hastened away along the bank. Taffinder, however, was delayed by having to return the emergency kit to its place in camp, and he was the only lad in sight when Brigham stepped suddenly from the tent and hailed him.

"Are they off?" Bruce asked nervously as Chub paused with evident reluctance. "Where's Dell?"

"Gone with Kingdon," answered the fat boy, edging away.

Brigham caught his breath and stared dazedly at the smaller lad. "With—Kingdon!" he gasped. "I thought—Starbuck——"

"He cut his hand so he couldn't go," explained Chub impatiently. "Dell took his place."

Brigham reached out and steadied himself by grasping one of the guy ropes. His face was white. "In—Kingdon's canoe?" he stammered.

"Co-rect," said Taffinder. "I've gotta get along or I'll never catch up." He started to run, but paused and flung back a bit of advice over his shoulder: "You better lie down, Brig; you look awful sick."

Then he raced off through the trees and disappeared, leaving the older chap standing motionless beside the tent. Vickers in that canoe! This was a turn of fate Brigham had not foreseen. A shiver ran over him, and then, with a sudden impulse, he snatched his hat from inside the tent and started running toward the lake.

He reached the bank in time to see the canoes bearing toward the mouth of the river a few hundred yards away. Driven by the impulse to confess what he had done before it was too late, and

so avert any possibility of a catastrophe, he had covered the distance swiftly; but now, within hailing distance of the fellows, an unexpected mental twist sealed his lips and kept him silent. He could not confess—it was impossible. Besides, the thing he dreaded was not a certainty; they might turn back before it was too late.

Nevertheless, hurrying along the bank and keeping the frail craft constantly in sight, yet remaining hidden himself among the trees, he was conscious of a sinking sense of dread. What if the worst should happen?

“What made me do it?” he panted in self-reproach as something like a realization of his villainy began to overwhelm him. “If the fellows ever find out they’ll all turn against me.” Then, trying to put it on someone else, he snarled: “It’s all Kingdon’s fault! I couldn’t help it, I hate him so much!”

Presently the canoes left the lake and entered the river which served as an outlet. The force of the current was quite perceptible, and Brigham was obliged to increase his pace to a smart trot in order to keep the light craft in view. Ahead of him he could hear the other boys crash-

ing through the bushes; once or twice he even caught a glimpse of the back of someone slower than the rest; but he was at particular pains to let none of them see him. More than ever, he meant to preserve the knowledge of his presence a secret; they must not suspect that the illness which had kept him from taking part in the race was anything but real.

Soon, however, there came a moment when he ceased to think of whether the others saw him or not; he failed, for a brief space, to think even of himself. The river grew narrower and flowed with increasing swiftness between rocky banks ten or twelve feet high. The last bend was reached, and ahead there lay an almost straight half mile course that terminated at the verge of the falls, over which the whole vast volume of water plunged roaring into the rocky basin far below. Bruce's distress increased with every passing moment. Breathlessly watching the canoes nearing a dead tree that marked the limit of even Phillips' daring, he began to quake and shudder. The paddlers were backing water constantly and with ever-increasing effort, and he noticed particularly how great a strain was be-

ing put upon the paddles. Cold perspiration broke out on his forehead. Why had he ever given in to that awful, cowardly impulse?

One of the canoes turned back, but he did not heed it. His straining eyes were fixed on the one occupied by Kingdon and Vickers. He had not realized a tithe of what his shameful action might bring about; he had not thought of anything save that in acting as he did he would gain revenge—would make Kingdon suffer for the humiliation he himself had endured.

Another canoe turned back. A moment later, the remaining two passed the stump. Then Phillips swept his craft round and began laboriously to fight back against the current.

Brigham was running again, his breath coming in labored gasps, his eyes, full of fear and despair, fixed on the fourth canoe. Suddenly the tortured boy's self-control snapped like a taut thread, and he shrieked aloud in a burst of wild hysteria:

“Stop! Stop! Come back! You'll be——”

The words, drowned by the roar of the cataract, ended in a groan as the catastrophe Brigham had dreaded came to pass. Twenty feet or more below the dead tree the victorious canoe

began slowly to turn. The strong sweep of Kingdon's paddle, aided considerably by his partner's skillful work, had brought the craft part way round when, without a single preliminary warning, Vickers' paddle snapped clean in two.

CHAPTER XIX.

A LESSON TO REMEMBER.

Rex did not need the gasping cry that burst from Dell's lips to tell him what had happened; the sudden lurching of the canoe and the swift swinging back into the current was enough. For an instant cold fear chilled him through.

But, though he was afraid, he kept a tight rein on his emotions. The added test upon his own paddle was tremendous, yet for a short time he managed, with straining muscles, to hold the craft against the rushing current. He even succeeded in sweeping the canoe close in against the rocky bank, hoping against hope for some slight hold or means of safety. When his own paddle splintered under the strain his face turned barely a shade less brown and his jaws clenched resolutely.

As they were whirled around toward the roaring cataract, Rex glanced, by chance, at the bit of broken paddle in his hand and saw to his bewilderment that half of the fracture was a clean,

straight cut, contrasting sharply with the jagged splintering of the remainder. The paddle had been sawed halfway through. He wondered what coward had done the thing and surmised it to be Brigham; yet at the same instant he realized that he would probably never know.

The broken bit of ash was tossed into the rushing current, and Kingdon searched the rocky bank with feverish eagerness. The surface presented nothing to lay hold upon. Along the top two of the fellows were running madly, but, even as Rex caught a glimpse of them, they were whisked back out of sight with the jerky abruptness of pictures on a screen. Rex turned his pale, strained face toward that ominous straight line, now so perilously near. There the river seemed to end with the clean exactness of a knife edge.

Then, for the first time, a gleam of hope leaped into his eyes. A twisted, distorted pine, rooted in a cleft of the rocks, thrust its gnarled trunk and ragged crown out over the rushing torrent. Rex wondered if he could reach it, and knew it was either that or the rocks at the foot of the falls. He crouched, his muscles gathered for a swift upward movement; then he suddenly re-

membered Vickers. For a flash he cringed, and then——

“Dell!” he cried sharply. “I’m going to jump for that tree. Grab me round the waist when you’re swept under. Get me?”

There was no response. The canoe rushed on. In a few seconds they would reach the pine. With every muscle rigid, Rex raised himself cautiously, crouching for the leap.

From the tree he saw a small stout limb projecting, and he selected it upon which to fasten his clutch close to the trunk. If it stood the strain there was a ghost of a chance; if it broke—well, he would have played his last card, and lost; that was all.

“Grab me, Dell!” he shouted as he launched himself at the limb.

He caught it and clung fast like a trapeze performer. Simultaneously, it seemed, two arms clutched his loins and held on, though the jerk and the added weight brought an awful strain on his hands and arms.

Rex wondered how long he could hold out and whether the boys were far behind; and then the fear came that, even if they did show up in time, they might not be able to render aid.

What fools they all had been to tempt Providence by this hair-brained escapade! Even if the paddles had not been tampered with, something else might have happened. If he escaped, it would be a lesson he would not soon forget. He heard Dell sobbing in a gasping, terrified way which shook his whole body.

"What is it?" Rex asked huskily.

"I'm slipping," quavered Vickers. "My legs are in the water almost to my knees. I can't hold——"

"Hang fast!" rasped Kingdon through his teeth. "You've got a cinch compared to me." He ended with a choking cry of joy, for Starbuck, pale and breathless, had suddenly appeared in his line of vision. For the tiniest fraction of time Starbuck crouched on the bank above the crevice in which the tree had root. Then, with reckless haste, he came sliding down and alighted on the inclined trunk, at the same time shouting to the other boys.

"Hang on, Rex!" he pleaded, crawling swiftly out and grasping his chum's wrists, forgetful of the injury to his own bandaged hand. "The fellows will be here in a jiffy. If I had a rope ——"

"Their belts," panted Rex. "If they're only strong enough!"

Nipper Ware and Shrimp Ballard came dashing up.

"Down here!" called Starbuck. "Off with your belts. Buckle 'em together and over the trunk. Let the loop down for Dell so's to take the weight off Rex. Hustle!"

By this time the boys were all clustered on the bank, and they hustled. Their leather belts were snatched off and buckled together without loss of a moment. Nevertheless, to Rex their movements seemed maddeningly slow, for the dragging weight of Vickers' body became greater with each passing instant. He could feel the ceaseless tugging of the current through the arms which gripped him so despairingly. His own arms were numb and dead save only in the finger-tips, and there it felt as if red-hot needles were piercing the flesh. Starbuck, grasping his wrists, continued to utter words of encouragement.

At last the string of belts was ready, and it was Nipper who crawled out and buckled the end one around the tree trunk. The lowest loop dangled in such a position that Vickers, instructed

by the boys, was able to draw up one foot and thrust his leg through it. More than half expecting they would snap beneath his weight, he shifted his hold from Kingdon to the belts. They supported him safely.

Relieved in a measure of the tremendous strain, Rex hung motionless for a moment or two before permitting Starbuck to assist him in climbing up to a perch on the tree trunk. He finally reached it quite out of breath. Shaking in every limb, though not from fear, he crept to the rocky shore and was given aid by the rejoicing boys on the bank above.

In the meantime Starbuck and Ware—the latter was proving himself built of heroic stuff in this emergency—were helping Vickers, who, reaching the tree trunk, crawled ashore, and was hoisted to the bank; he promptly collapsed in a heap.

Rex looked down at Dell, a quizzical smile slowly curving his lips. "He doesn't look so heavy," he said, "but I'll give anybody odds of two to one that he weighs a ton. It's a good thing you weren't in his place, Chub; both my arms would have been pulled out by the roots."

Phillips and the other canoeists suddenly came

bursting through the trees, and Rex smiled still more broadly. "You're a bit late for the grand finale of the performance, gentlemen," he announced, "and there'll be no repetition to-day."

Larry Phillips stared at him, an odd expression in his gray eyes. Presently his freckled face relaxed, and he smote Rex on the back with no gentle hand.

"You're yellow," he exclaimed—"yellow as pure gold! And that's the stuff you're made of! Wish we were going to have you on the football team next fall. When that second paddle snapped, and you went tearing down stream, I came near passing away. Funny thing about those paddles breaking. I'd have trusted myself anywhere with the one I looked at last night. Perhaps the other was flawed, and when that went the double strain was too much for the good one."

"Perhaps that was it," said Kingdon, his jaw tightening the least bit and his eyes hardening for a moment. "It was a fool stunt, anyhow, Larry. So I decided while I was hanging to the limb of the tree down there."

"I fully agree with you, Rex, and I'm so proud of my part in the performance, that you'll never

hear me telling anybody about it. We had to chase back an everlasting ways before we could land, and when I saw you two dangling, I realized what I'd got you in for. Oh, yes, it was a very proud and happy moment for me! What idiots we fellows were! The average inmate of a nut factory is a wise gazabo compared with any of us."

By this time Vickers had recovered, and was the somewhat shamefaced center of a group of the smaller boys, all morbidly curious to know how he felt. Now and then, on the way back to camp, he cast an odd glance at Kingdon; but neither then nor afterward did he broach the subject of his rescue to the chap who had saved him from almost certain death. He felt that he couldn't talk about it, and he was irritated and annoyed by the change in his sentiments toward Rex; it was against his desire to like Kingdon any more than he had before.

From the first, they had been opposed in everything, and Dell had never lost an opportunity to sneer at the other lad, even stooping to try to fasten on Rex the stigma of dishonesty. To picture himself caring at all for the fellow was as distasteful as it was difficult, yet precisely that

transformation was being worked in him in spite of himself. Gratitude came first, then admiration, and, last of all, a sense of liking—an awkward, embarrassed wonder as to how it would seem to have Kingdon for a friend.

Dell tried to thrust these reflections from his mind, wondering what Brig would think of such softness. He found it to be something, however, not to be uprooted and flung aside as easily as a wayside weed. Tucked away in a corner of his brain, it grew and expanded until at length Vickers found himself deciding that, after all, what Bruce thought or felt on the subject was immaterial.

“He’s to blame for the whole business, anyhow,” he muttered under his breath. “If he hadn’t quit to-day, I’d never have been in the blooming canoe. So I guess he can cut out any remarks on the subject.”

CHAPTER XX.

THE PENALTY.

Such is the careless exuberance of youth that, even before reaching camp, the serious features of that chapter of accidents had been forgotten. Interestedly and admiringly, the boys discussed Kingdon's athletic prowess in making that spectacular rescue of himself and his companion from the doomed canoe. Vickers was praised, too, more than one fellow remarking that he'd never have believed Dell could hold on so long. The puzzle of the paddles breaking when they did absorbed the minds of several of the older lads, but nobody thought of bringing up the "might have beens," or stopped his chatter long enough to consider the ghastly consequences had Rex failed to grasp the limb of that overhanging pine.

Kingdon was no exception, for he did not believe in exciting himself over the things which hadn't happened, especially when his mind was already filled with much more tangible worries.

Chief of these was the suspicion that he knew whom to thank for their narrow escape; and, running it a close second, was a growing realization of the discomfort and inconvenience the loss of their canoe would cause the whole party. Coming within sight of where the three canoes had been hastily left, he made a half joking comment on that subject which was taken rather seriously.

"It's a shame!" exclaimed Phillips. "I've been thinking about that, and I reckon you'll have to use one of ours until you can scare up something to take its place."

"But that'll put you fellows in a hole," protested Rex.

"Oh, we've got three, you know, and it won't hurt the kids to take turns going out. What do you say if we slip up to Tobique to-morrow and see what's doing in the way of sea-going hacks for hire?"

Rex agreed, though protesting that it wasn't up to Phillips to replace the lost canoe. But the older chap was evidently accustomed to having his own way, and with an air of easy firmness and complete finality cultivated to perfection only by the leaders and big athletes in a school like

Walcott Hall, he informed Kingdon that, having made it his business, "there was nothing more to be said."

"Fade away, old top!" he laughed, stepping into his light craft and taking up the paddle. "Never contradict your elders. Forget to wind the alarm, Tug?" he called to Melchor, who was dawdling on the bank. "Swallow a little dynamite and thump yourself on the chest; it's fine to wake a fellow up suddenly."

With a somewhat inane retort, Melchor took his position in the other end of the canoe; and Phillips, remarking casually that he meant to reach camp before anyone else, afoot or horseback, pushed off from shore. Rex smiled to himself as he set off briskly through the trees, but soon that smile faded. The thought of those treacherously sawn paddles had popped back into his mind again, and this time it lingered.

Among the campers there were just two who disliked him to a degree that made it possible they would perpetrate such a trick. Vickers was one, but he could be eliminated. Had he known about the paddles, no sort of persuasion could have induced him to trust himself to that canoe. There remained only Brigham.

Rex could not bring himself to believe that Bruce had realized the possible consequences of his cowardly action. With a dull and unimaginative mind, it was probable that he had not looked forward to the possible tragedy that had barely been averted. Driven into a state of sullen fury by the fooling of the afternoon before, he doubtless had seized the first chance of getting even, and had tampered with the paddles merely for the purpose of making Rex fail in the contest. He must have accomplished his sneaking work sometime between supper time and day-break; and Kingdon remembered, with a sudden sense of conviction, that he had awakened in the night and heard a slight scraping sound of a puzzling nature.

"It was that rotter sawing my paddles!" he growled. "How did he fill up the cracks, I wonder? Glue and sawdust would do it, I suppose, with a coating of shellac. Even sawdust and shellac might work—and there was Tug's can of shellac ready for use!"

He remembered also that Brigham had spread his blankets outside the tent, making it possible for him to move about the camp with little risk of detection. His sudden illness, which had pro-

vided a ready excuse for him to drop out of the contest, also looked suspicious; and by the time camp was reached Rex hadn't a doubt in his mind that Bruce was to blame for their close call.

The canoes and the walkers struck the place at almost the same moment, and for a time noise and bustle, loud talk and frequent laughter resounded. While contributing his share to the joshing and banter, Rex kept one eye on Brigham's tent, and presently he saw Bruce step slowly forth and hesitate a moment or two before engaging Chub Taffinder in conversation.

"Finding out all about it," murmured Kingdon under his breath. "You'd fancy he'd be a bit fussed, but he doesn't seem to turn a hair."

Could he have known that Bruce had seen everything, including the sensational rescue, and had been back in camp barely five minutes, Rex would have understood the fellow's apparently unnatural self-possession. As it was, Brigham's seeming callousness irritated him. Nevertheless, he was struck by the boy's pallor and an expression of strain and suffering about his eyes. He looked really ill, and Rex, deciding to put him to the test later, walked toward the tent where he

had slept last night. He was passing Brigham when, to his surprise, the fellow spoke.

"I hear you had—an accident," Bruce said awkwardly, yet with an undercurrent of earnestness in his voice which puzzled Rex. "I'm—mighty glad it wasn't any worse."

Kingdon's lips curled, but his voice and manner were deceptively smooth as he said, "Yes, it might have been worse, I suppose."

There was a pause, finally broken by Bruce in sheer desperation.

"Funny thing, your paddles breaking that way," he said nervously, possibly actuated by the inexplicable fascination which brings many criminals back to the scenes of their misdeeds. "I can't understand it at all."

Kingdon's eyes narrowed. "Can't you? It was really very natural."

Brigham's jaw dropped and he stared in a bewildered and almost frightened manner at Rex.

"Wa-what do you mean?" he stammered. "Why should they break?"

Kingdon gazed steadily at the uneasy fellow, and Brigham tried in vain to meet his eye.

"Because they were sawed part way through

by somebody who wanted them to smash," Rex stated deliberately. "Last night, after we'd gone to bed, someone sneaked them off into the woods, made the little cuts, repaired the visible damage with sawdust and shellac, and replaced them in the canoe. A job to be proud of, wasn't it?"

"It was a—a mean trick," said Bruce huskily. "That's what I think about it."

"It was—and then some!"

"Who do you think did it?"

"If I wanted to," declared Rex, "I could put my hand on him in a second. But I don't want to—I don't want to dirty my hand. Don't back away, Brigham. I want to state that I can't bring myself to believe the fellow realized just what he was doing, and that is why I don't light on him, all spraddled out. If he's got any sense, however, he knows now that he came within an ace of putting himself in the same class with the late unlamented Mr. Cain. That ought to make him proud of himself."

He got his sweater from the tent and returned to the group at the float. Dudley Durand had joined the crowd, carrying a handsome rifle which, like many of his possessions, was the best that money could buy. Everyone flocked about

to examine it, and, coming up, Rex heard Louis Lebaude's voice raised in shrill excitement:

"You shoot at ze loon yesterday?" the Canadian lad questioned hurriedly. "You say ze bullet she curve over toward our point? I do not understan'. How can she so great a curve make?"

"It's like a skipping stone," explained Tug Melchor good-naturedly. "You've seen a stone take a curve as it skipped, haven't you? Sometimes a bullet does the same thing. I suppose a little wave deflects it from a straight course at first. We must have been half or three-quarters of a mile from your point when Dud fired at the loon yesterday, and I saw the bullet curve that way after it struck the water."

Face flushed and eyes shining, the Canadian lad whirled on Rex Kingdon. "You hear, ol' man?" he cried excitedly. "You understan'? I was right, it was not Michaud who shoot. I knew it could not be heem, but no one of you would listen."

"Reckon we'll have to believe you now," admitted Kingdon. "Did that happen around half past eleven, Dud?"

"Just about."

"You score, Baudie," Rex said unhesitatingly. "That lifts the shadow of suspicion from Mr. Michaud. It's time we were going home, Red," he went on, glancing at Phillips. "Which one of these racing cruisers are you going to let us have?"

It took some time to decide on the canoe, to make arrangements for the trip up the lake the following day, and to get through with the good-bys. But at last the two craft shot out from the shore on which the late hosts clustered, hurling pleasantries at their departing guests. They were so diverted by their occupation that not one of them observed the tall figure of Bruce Brigham standing at the entrance of his tent staring after Rex Kingdon. He, out of all the crowd, was still dwelling on what might have happened, and he seemed for the first time to see himself judged by the contemptible deed he had performed. The method he had pursued to wreak vengeance had been nothing short of dastardly. He had played the coward and the sneak—he, who had always prided himself upon his bravery!

What would the fellows say when they knew? Brigham had a sudden vivid mental picture of

Phillips' face, scathing, scornful, utterly contemptuous. He admired the older fellow, and had sought to stand well in his estimation. With a catch in his throat that was almost a sob, Bruce stepped back into the tent and dropped the flap.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MAN IN THE THICKET.

“Speaking of solid ivory domes, this bunch is well supplied with them!” ejaculated Kingdon, pausing before the open door of the cabin.

“What’s troubling your highness now?” inquired Starbuck. “I thought Nip was carrying around the only bone top-piece in the crowd.”

“Reckon me in with Nip and the rest of you, please,” invited Rex. “Look at the way we chase off for the day and leave a bunch of expensive rods, two shotguns and three rifles, to say nothing of a nice collection of odds and ends, scattered around invitingly for anybody who may come along. The portal of our palatial shanty hasn’t a lock, I know; but we even don’t make use of the latch. Everything wide open——”

He paused, an odd wrinkle dodging into his forehead.

Nipper Ware whistled softly. “But we didn’t leave it open,” he protested. “I was the last one

out, and I remember, sure as anything, that I took pains to shut the door."

"Quite so, little one; don't get heated," soothed Rex. "I remember it now, myself. I looked back and saw you shut it tight. Wonder how it happens to be open now?"

"Wind, probably," yawned Wrenshall. "I guess the old latch isn't much use." He entered and took his trout rod from the rack. "It's foolish bothering about locks and things when there isn't anybody in a hundred miles to break in. No tramps in these woods, old man."

In spite of Dick's rather patronizing tone, Kingdon failed to come back at him; noticing which, Starbuck was surprised, though he made no comment. He saw that his chum was fussing with the door latch, and then his attention was distracted by the departure of Wrenshall and Scott to fish. When he looked round again, Rex was not in sight.

"Out at ze back," informed Lebaude in answer to Kent's question. "I go after ze blue heron," he announced, picking up his rifle. "Weesh me ze luck."

Soon after Baudie departed along the shore, hearing Kingdon calling him, Starbuck hurried

out and saw Rex just emerging from a thicket, his face troubled and grim.

"I knew it wasn't the wind that blew the door open," said the blond chap. "Take a look at what I found."

Turning back, he parted the bushes and pointed at the ground. It was a low spot which the overflow from a tiny spring kept constantly soft. Bending over, Starbuck clearly saw the prints of moccasined feet. He straightened swiftly and looked at Kingdon.

"You mean somebody has been here while we were away?" he said doubtfully.

"And that somebody was our dear friend Michaud. The latch of the door holds perfectly. Somebody went into the cabin. With that idea in my noodle, I snooped around looking for signs. The bushes right here showed me that a deer or a man or something had gone through them since this morning. It wasn't a deer."

"I should say not! But do you know it was Michaud, or are you making a guess?"

"Guess—nix! Look at the prints. Don't they give the fellow away?"

"Not to my dull blinkers. Maybe your piercing orbs——"

"Don't you see that the left foot toes in?"

"So it does; but, never having seen the gent in question, how do you know he has that graceful little habit when he locomotes?"

Kingdon took his chum by the arm and led him back to the front of the cabin.

"Hopeless case, yours," he sighed. "You'll never make even a Doctor Watson. You remember seeing the tracks where he stood under the oak the day we thought he shot at us?"

"Uh-huh. But he'd pounded the ground flat and hard."

"Not quite. There were prints around the edges, and they all toed in with the left foot. Wonder what he's snooping round here for. We ought to have a lock for the door, old man. Next time he might not be so considerate." Then he called loudly: "Nip, you scoundrel, peel and get into the aqua pura. Don't nurse the notion that you're going to dodge that swimming lesson."

With a nervous giggle at being so accurately read, Ware undressed and got into his trunks. Rex followed the youngster's example. Having put his pupil through his paces, and shown him a new stroke, Kingdon retired to the bank to dress.

"Go out further," he urged, keeping an eye on Ware. "There's not enough water where you are to float a cat."

Nipper grinned and propelled himself a few feet from shore. "I'm afraid I might step into a hole," he explained.

"What if you did?" scoffed Kingdon. "Couldn't you swim across it? You're getting to be a regular duck when I'm with you. I didn't have to hold your chin up much of any to-day."

"I know," mumbled Nipper; "but I can't seem to do anything alone. I don't believe I'll ever _____"

"Tell it to Sweeney!" interrupted Rex impatiently. "I've heard enough of that. You're going to work up some confidence if I have to stick to you all summer." Picking up a good-sized stone, he assumed a threatening pose. "Beat it out there where it's over your knees or I'll open fire on you."

With a nervous laugh, Ware was starting to obey when, to his relief, he perceived an approaching diversion. It was a canoe containing "Pop" Winkler, his ill-tempered young helper, Jed, and a wide-shouldered, tawny-haired stranger. Gliding silently round the rocky point, it

came within Kingdon's line of vision and brought to his face a sudden flash of apprehension, which, however, was quickly dispelled by an expression of evident pleasure.

"Come right in," Rex invited as the canoe touched the smooth beach. "Don't stop to knock. How's Little Sunshine to-day? I presume you've called to shower us with the radiance of your beaming countenance." He smiled cheerfully upon the sour-faced Jed, who scowled in return.

"You go to grass!" growled the backwoodsman who, despite his size and bulk, looked as if he might be still in his teens. "I ain't goin' to take no more o' your fresh guff."

"I'd offer you a chair," returned Kingdon with apparent seriousness as Jed stepped out of the canoe, "only we're having all our furniture newly upholstered and varnished."

"I s'pose you think that's funny," sneered Jed, his thick lips curling.

Rex lifted his eyebrows with an odd, whimsical quirk, and gazed blandly at the hulking youth. "Not half so funny as some of the things that come to me without being invited. For instance—— I beg pardon, Mr. Winkler—didn't quite catch that."

"I asked if you'd seen anything of Michaud since we were down last," the storekeeper repeated. "I got word he was still 'round these parts, so I brought the sheriff along, in hopes there'd be something doing. You ain't seen him?"

Kingdon seemed to hesitate before he answered: "Not recently. We spent night before last at a camp across the lake. So he might have been prowling around up here without our knowing it. Two days ago we saw a man down along the shore, but he was too far away to be recognized without a glass."

"Uh-huh!" grunted the sheriff, whose name was Holloway. "That was him, most likely. Where was he when you spotted him?"

"There's a crooked oak near the edge of the water about half a mile below here, and he was standing underneath that," replied Rex promptly.

But when they continued to ply him with questions he cleverly avoided telling many things without, however, making a single direct misstatement. Presently Jed got back into the canoe, and they pushed off, the young backwoodsman attempting a crude witticism that Rex promptly

turned against him to the amusement of Winkler and the sheriff.

Wrenshall, Scotty and Lebaude were away from camp, but the arrival of the trio from Tobique had drawn Starbuck forth from the cabin. When the departing canoe had disappeared, Kent stood watching Kingdon in silence, an expression almost of anxiety on his face. Nipper Ware, however, was full to the brim with bewilderment, and the strangers were barely out of sight when his emotions bubbled over.

"See here," he spluttered, "what made you twist and turn and duck to keep from telling them lots of things that might have been interesting to them? I'll be jounced if I know what you're——"

"If you start worrying about the things you don't know, it's you for the dippy house, Nip," interrupted Rex. "Don't force us to put you away any sooner than we have to, and keep in mind the sweet truth that the less you're wise to, the less you'll have to fuss about. See here a minute, Kent."

He moved toward the cabin, Starbuck beside him. When they were out of Nipper's hearing, Rex spoke guardedly.

"I'd like to warn him," he said earnestly.

"Michaud, you mean?" questioned Starbuck.

"Well, then, there isn't much time to waste. If you want to stay here, I think I could find my way to that shack of his."

"I'm not so old and rheumatic as all that. Baudie would be the best one to do it. Where'd he go?"

"Down along the shore after that big blue heron he's been trying to bag. I'll give him the yell."

Several times the shrill, distinctive call vibrated through the still woods, but without an answer to show that it had been heard. Finally Rex grew impatient.

"Won't wait for him," he told Starbuck. "We'd better chase over ourselves. Hi, Nip! If Phillips shows up, tell him we'll be back before long, and have him stay. If that doesn't detain him, throw him down and sit on him. That would be an easy job for you."

Kingdon and Starbuck turned south at once, but they had not proceeded far through the woods when both were surprised to see Lebaude hurrying toward them.

"I hear ze call," said the Canadian boy as he came up. "I come——"

"Why the deuce didn't you answer it?" broke in Starbuck.

"I watch ze men from Tobique an' forget to hollaire back," hastily explained the Canadian. "What they do here? Are they again after Michaud?"

Rex nodded. "You're wise. I'm blowed if I believe the man stole that kale, after all, Baudie. If he's innocent, he ought to be warned. If we only knew where we'd be likely to find him——" He paused suggestively, and Lebaude, his face beaming, took him up instantly.

"I know—that ees, I think I could fin' him. I should go at once—yes?"

Rex made no answer. He was staring intently at a thicket a short distance from the water's edge, and suddenly his voice rang out sharply:

"Wait—Michaud! Come back!"

In the silence that followed, the boys heard a faint rustling in the thicket; it ceased abruptly. After a moment the rustling began again and grew more distinct. Then a bearded man, bearing a rifle, stepped forth and halted, regarding the boys with mingled doubt and boldness.

It was rather shadowy under the trees, but Rex could see that the man was of medium height, well built and muscular, his long dark hair falling in a matted mass upon his shoulders. Presently Lebaude drew his breath with a queer, sudden catch, and stepped swiftly forward, staring up into the man's face, his own slowly paling under the stress of some gripping emotion. A low cry burst from his lips:

"Mon Dieu! You are not Jean Michaud."

Leaping forward like a panther, he grasped the stranger's shirt and began to shake him with all his strength. "Who are you?" he shouted savagely. "Who are you? What do you do with my father?"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE MASQUERADER.

Bewildered, Rex and Kent stared dazedly at the strange scene. "Not Michaud?" the former exclaimed at length. "Bring me my smelling salts! What the deuce do you mean, Baudie?"

"He's right," admitted the stranger in a rather pleasant voice which held a touch of troubled embarrassment. "I'm not Michaud." Gently he broke Lebaude's grasp on his shirt. "Take it easy, my boy. Your father and I were the best of friends."

The color ebbed suddenly from the Canadian lad's face. "*Were!*" he echoed sharply. "It sound—you mean—that he—is no longer——" Apparently he found it impossible to finish.

For a moment it seemed as if the stranger meant to evade the question, but after a brief hesitation, he placed one hand on Baudie's shoulder and spoke feelingly:

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to break it to you like that. I guess living alone so long has clogged

my thinking gear. It happened last October. We'd been living together for two months when I came back one night to find that he had accidentally shot himself. He didn't live ten minutes after I showed up."

"Shot!" muttered Baudie in a heartbroken voice. Suddenly his head went up and he glared at the man with blazing eyes. "Shot! How I know his own gun do eet? How I know eet was as you say? You say you live with him. You live in his hut ever since—yes? You take his name—likely all else he got. How do I know eet was not you who——"

"Steer off!" interposed the stranger sharply. "I'm not the sort to murder a pal in cold blood. That's what we were—pals. He found me when I was lost in the woods and pretty near starved to death. He took me in and fed and sheltered me. After I was all right, he let me stay with him. I think he even liked me. I know I liked him, for he was one of the whitest chaps I ever saw. He had a reputation for crookedness and underhand doings, and perhaps his respect for the game laws wasn't worth mentioning; but he was loyal to the core—a man to swear by. You wouldn't even think what you just said, son, if

you knew how lonesome I've been all these months."

The boy flushed, but, though he calmed down considerably, did not at once relinquish his position. "I have the right to doubt," he persisted. "You are a stranger to me. You have take my father's name an' his belongings. Why is that? Why in all this time am I not inform' of this so great grief that have come for me?"

He blinked his eyes rapidly several times, but otherwise he kept a hold upon himself which commanded the respect of his two friends, who knew him to be intensely emotional.

"I never sent word because I hadn't the least idea where to send it," the stranger explained readily. "I knew Michaud had a son, but he never told me any more than that, you see. When I found him that night he was too far gone to even speak, and it was only after his death that I discovered his real name. He left considerable money which I've been keeping until I could make inquiries. When I came back to the house that day and found your note, I realized right away what my duty was. Since then I've been doing my best to get hold of you alone."

"Oh!" exclaimed Rex in sudden enlightenment.

"That's why you were fiddling around the other day down by the crooked oak."

"I'd found out which of you was Lebaude, and I was watching to see if he'd start out alone. When that rifle was fired across the narrows I decided to beat it. I don't want to attract any more attention than I have to just now."

"Because of that robbery, I suppose," said Kingdon.

The man whirled on him. "What do you know about that?" he demanded harshly, a thrill of nervous apprehension in his voice.

"Only what Winkler told us," returned Rex. "He's been over twice, and he brought the sheriff with him to-day. That's what we started out to tell you."

The stranger drew a deep breath. "So that's what's up." Instinctively he glanced toward the water, but they were too far back amid the trees either to see or be seen. "I'm much obliged to you, boys, I'm sure. It was kind of you. Of course I didn't rob his old till, or whatever it was; but give a dog a bad name and——"

"But the bad name isn't your own," cut in Kingdon. "You're passing for Jean Michaud.

Winkler and everybody else think that's who you are."

A dull flush crept into the man's face, and for a moment he stared at Rex with odd intentness.

"I may as well tell you the truth," he said at length. "I took that name and identity because it was safer than my own. Michaud had worked up a reputation which made people afraid of him. He was supposed to be a poacher, a smuggler, and an all-round dangerous character. They tell the story of those two game wardens going into the woods after him and never showing up again. Everybody thinks Jean did away with them, but of course he didn't. One of them broke his leg in the wilderness, and starved. Jean found his body in the spring and buried it. He never even saw the other. Except for shooting a buck now and then for food, he never did a lawless thing. He was a sad and lonely man, a little queer in the head, perhaps. He came up here after his wife died, didn't he?" he questioned, glancing at Lebaude.

The latter nodded. "He grieve heemself seeck. He cannot bear to see people. He want the solitude. The doctor say hees brain go leetle bit

wrong. I try to stop heem, but he mus' go to the woods. That was seex year 'go. I see heem four time since then, an' now he ees gone for always."

His lips quivered and his eyes filled with tears, but still he did not break down. "If only I have not been shame of him eet would not hurt so bad. I lie 'bout the peecture because I was shame for you to know my father live in a wretched hut, a common trapper of skins. I theenk you laugh——"

"Don't be ridiculous, Baudie!" blurted Rex with a curtness which hid his real feelings. "You can't know us very well if you think we're that sort." He turned again to the stranger. "And so, having got everybody jolly well scared of him, Michaud was left to live his life in peace, I suppose?"

The man nodded. "Few people came anywhere near this part of the lake if they could help it."

"It didn't need much disguising, then, to fix you up so you could take his place?"

"None at all. We were about the same height, build and complexion. He was older than I, but when you get a thatch like this and a bunch

of whiskers sprouting all over the place age don't cut much figure."

"At that," mused Rex, "I don't suppose he was really so much older. You must be thirty-five or eight, aren't you?"

The stranger laughed bitterly. "Is it as bad as that? I knew this life was wearing me out, but I didn't think—— Oh, never mind! But you're away off, son; even if I do look like a has-been I was only twenty-four last March."

"I was making a bid to get your real age. I thought it was about that," chuckled Rex. "You'll look more like it when you've shaved. You're Dan Markham, aren't you?"

If the boy had suddenly thrown a deadly bomb, the surprise could scarcely have been greater. The man's jaw sagged and he crouched a little, gripping and half lifting the rifle. He tried to speak, but though his lips moved, it was some time before he huskily stammered:

"How did you——"

"Scotty told us about his cousin who had given the detectives the slip and disappeared into these woods. When you told about taking Michaud's name and reputation because it was safer than

your own, I thought of Scotty's yarn and wondered if you weren't the lost cousin."

"Scotty!" exclaimed the man in astonishment. "Jimmy? And I never knew the kid was here! While I was trying to pick out Lebaude, I thought one of the boys looked familiar, but I never expected——"

He broke off abruptly with a slight cough, and his lids dropped to hide the eager, almost yearning, light which had leaped into his eyes. When he looked up again his face was composed and pale.

"Well, now you've found out, what do you think you're going to do about it?" he asked curtly.

"Do?" echoed Rex in a slightly puzzled tone.

For an instant he stared questioningly at Markham before a realization of the truth flashed over him: the man did not know that his name was cleared and that he had nothing to dread because of the crime with which he was originally accused.

A sudden expression of satisfaction filled Kingdon's face as he thought of what the news would mean to the haggard, uncouth chap before

him. When he spoke, he could hardly keep his voice from trembling with excitement.

"Do?" he repeated. "Well, I'd advise you to get a shave and haircut before you start back for Portland. The real thief confessed two months ago."

Markham could not believe it, and his eyes glittered angrily. "Maybe that's your idea of humor," he growled, "but——"

"'Tis ever thus!" sighed Rex, rolling his eyes upward. "I'm always misjudged. When I endeavor to be funny, people don't get me, and when I'm serious, they laugh. I'm serious now. The real robber confessed. Scotty says it was all in the papers. Nobody's got a thing against you—except Pop Winkler. Cutting him out, you can show up anywhere you choose any time you like, and tell the whole world to go chase itself round the block."

At last the man understood, and he turned away his head to hide his emotions. When he looked back again, there were joy and thanksgiving in his eyes, a change quite transforming him. In a husky voice he asked for Scott, and being informed that he was off fishing with Wrenshall, speculated as to the time they would

return. Having expressed a desire to accompany the boys to their camp, Markham had started in that direction when he suddenly remembered Winkler's party.

"I guess I'd better not chance it," he said, stopping short. "They might come round there on their way back and find me."

"What if they do?" protested Rex. "You're innocent, aren't you?"

"As innocent as you are, but they've got a fair case against me as far as circumstantial evidence goes, and I've had too much of that sort of thing already to take a chance."

"But they can't prove something that isn't so," persisted Kingdon, forgetting for a moment Markham's own unfortunate experience in that line.

"Oh, can't they?" retorted the man bitterly. "That's all you know about it, my boy. If I hadn't given those sleuths the slip, they'd had me down at Thomaston doing time for another fellow's crooked work. I was in Tobique the night Winkler's store was robbed. I'd been up north. Coming home, I struck Tobique about eleven and crawled into a barn and slept till daylight. I was seen and recognized coming out. There

you've got your circumstantial case, and it's one I propose to duck. Back in Portland under my own name, I can laugh at it; but up here, with a lot of these ignorant, prejudiced backwoodsmen against me, I wouldn't have a show. I'll keep out of the way until these fellows have gone back to the village. Then I can come out and have a word with Jim before hiking south. If you see them——"

"Drop that gun and put up your hands, Michaud!" snapped a sharp voice. "No monkey business, for I've got you covered."

Rex spun round instantly, as did the others, and four pairs of startled eyes stared in silent dismay upon the figures of the sheriff, Pop Winkler and the grinning Jed, each with a loaded weapon held ready for use.

CHAPTER XXIII.

REX BECOMES SERIOUS.

For an instant it seemed that Markham would attempt to use his rifle in self-defense. Realizing what such an action meant, Rex Kingdon swiftly gripped his arm.

"Don't be foolish," warned the boy earnestly.

"I won't," said Markham, dropping the rifle and lifting his empty hands. "Much obliged."

Jed Browdy guffawed. "Fine bunch, you air, takin' up with a thief! I knowed you was havin' dealings with him, an' I tells Winkler so. I says you'd be likely to hunt him up the minute we was gone, so we sneaks back, and now you're ketched. How do you like it, smarty? The joke's on you this time."

The unconcerned smile Rex bent upon the jeering man was a work of art, for he really ached to punch the fellow's head.

"This is just the beginning of the joke," he said coolly. "There's a last laugh coming to someone. Perhaps it won't be to you."

"Mebbe it won't and mebbe it will. Anyhow, we've nabbed the robber, and it looks to me like we'd ketched some accomplices with him."

"Cut out that gab, Jed, and take keer o' Michaud's gun," ordered the sheriff. "Then you kin keep him covered while I put the irons on him."

Markham gave a start and his face darkened. "That's not necessary," he protested. "You've got me, and I'll come without being handcuffed. At the same time I protest——"

He broke off abruptly, biting his lips. In his impulsive resentment he had failed to make the slightest attempt to disguise his voice—and Jean Michaud had always spoken with an accent. Strangely enough, no one seemed to notice the slip, and Markham suddenly remembered that there was good reason to believe that not one of these men had ever exchanged words with the recluse. Both from economy and because he wished to have no dealings with people living near him, Michaud had always bought his few scant supplies across the border. He had kept away from Tobique, the inhabitants of which must have gained their conception of the man from a few fleeting glimpses of him obtained at a

distance, and from the accounts of trappers or woodsmen who had met him at closer quarters.

"That's all right," retorted the sheriff stubbornly. "I don't take nobody's word in a case like this. You're a dangerous character, and I ain't runnin' no chances."

Browdy secured Markham's rifle and watched with great satisfaction the sheriff snap the handcuffs on the wrists of the pale and unresisting man. When this was done, the young backwoodsman resumed his jeering:

"I guess you ain't so much, old geezer. You'll find it ain't safe to break into people's tills around these parts, you will. They'll give you a haircut and a shave down to Thomaston. You want to look out you don't catch cold——"

"That natural gas well is leaking again," said Rex. "If it isn't plugged it'll asphyxiate us all."

As the boy had hoped, the remark roused the resentment of the loud-mouthed Browdy, who snarled and spluttered until called down by both Winkler and the sheriff. Under cover of this, Rex whispered to Markham:

"If you have to talk don't fake Michaud's accent, and don't say anything more than you can help. I've got an idea that may work out."

The prisoner's face did not lighten, for he felt that he was in an extremely ticklish position, and to hope for anything from the efforts of a boy seemed absurd. While he appreciated Kingdon's interest in his plight, the lad's evident belief in his own ability struck Markham as a bit conceited.

Having silenced Jed, Halloway ordered the return to their canoes. The boys trailed along behind and were on hand to witness the annoyance of the sheriff on realizing he had four people to squeeze into a canoe which could comfortably hold but three. It was then that Rex began to carry his plan into execution.

"Two of us are going up along, and we can give Mr. Winkler a seat in our canoe if he wants it," he stated without too much cordiality.

Winkler looked a trifle surprised, but accepted the offer. The boys piloted their passenger back to the cabin and down to the shore where the single remaining canoe was drawn up. Here Nipper, bursting with curiosity as to what was happening, and sore because he had been obliged to remain on the point, met them with demands for information.

"Baudie'll tell you," said Rex as he got the

canoe ready. "Kent and I are going up the lake. No signs of Phillips, hey? That's odd. Well, when he shows up tell him we had to take Mr. Winkler to Tobique. Very likely Red'll come alone after us."

The old man stepped spryly into the canoe, which shot out into the lake, propelled by Kingdon's paddle, Kent being unable to give a hand. They were a little ahead of the others, who had to pull round the point, and, instead of waiting for them to come up, the young camper set a pace that added to the lead. Rex kept a keen lookout for Scotty and Wrenshall, who had taken the other canoe and gone off fishing directly after breakfast. Failing to see anything of them by the time they had proceeded two miles or more up the lake, he gave up any idea of counting on Markham's cousin. Then he turned his attention to their passenger.

"Would you mind putting us wise about the robbery, Mr. Winkler?" he asked. "You didn't give us many details the other day, and we're both rather more interested now than we were then."

His pleasant manner and infectious smile appealed to the storekeeper. Winkler was a man

who dealt more or less with poachers, and he was not especially prejudiced against them because they broke the game laws. Had he not believed the supposed Michaud had entered his place of business and robbed him, the woodsman might have killed game out of season year after year without ever rousing old Pop to murmur over his methods. Robbery was a different matter, however, and, backed by public sentiment, Winkler had done his best to run the culprit down.

"Why, sure, sonny," he agreed in answer to Rex. "What is it you want to know?"

"How much money was stolen?"

"One hundred and eight dollars and thirty-two cents!"

The old man's thin lips straightened suddenly over his almost toothless gums, and his eyes snapped. Rex was not left in doubt as to where lay the sting of the affair. The annoyance of being robbed meant nothing to Pop Winkler compared to the loss of his money. If he could get that back, the chances were ten to one against his caring much what became of the thief.

"That was quite a bunch to lose!" said Kingdon sympathetically. "You don't pull in that much every day, do you?"

"Hardly. It come mostly from a lot o' sports over on the Minnisink, an' the supe o' the lumber company layin' in some supplies. I never thought of hiding it away. We ain't never had no thievin' before."

"Was it taken from the till?" inquired Rex.

"Till? No!" blurted Winkler, disturbed by another recollection. "It was in the cash register drawer, and the critter broke the lock all to smash getting it open. That means another eight or ten dollars to have it fixed."

"That *is* tough luck! Did he break anything getting into the store?"

"Nope. Forced the winder catch with a knife, an' just raised her up."

Rex glanced over his shoulder at the sheriff's canoe. "What makes you suspect him?" he interrogated, with a backward jerk of his head. "Did he leave a clue or anything?"

"Wally Johnson seen him sneakin' out o' the back o' my place just come daybreak, and I guess that's clue enough to settle his hash."

"Looks a bit bad," Rex admitted. "Who's Wally Johnson?"

"A trapper, gum digger and logger."

"Was he positive it was Michaud. Couldn't he have been mistaken in the dim light?"

Winkler laughed. "With them whiskers an' all that bush o' hair? I guess not! Besides, he's one o' the few that's met the feller face to face in the woods an' talked with him. Michaud keeps almighty close, you know. For all he's lived around so long, I ain't never before been as nigh him as I was to-day."

Kingdon nodded and was silent for a moment or two.

"Is this Johnson where you could easily get hold of him?" he asked after a little thought.

"He is to-day. I left him in charge o' the store. Why?"

"I wondered whether he'd be so sure about the identification in broad daylight," returned the boy. "You see, I've got a notion the fellow you've grabbed isn't the one who broke into your cash register, and I'm working my bean to figure out how to prove I'm right."

"Don't waste your time, son," advised Winkler. "Michaud's the thief, all right. Look at his record. There's no goin' ag'in' that. I 'low when Holloway goes through him, he'll find the money

in his clothes. I fergot to tell him to search right off."

"Still," persisted Rex, "it wouldn't do any hurt to have Johnson give the prisoner the once over—that is, inspect him," he explained, catching a puzzled look on the storekeeper's face.

"Nary a bit," agreed the old man. "When it comes to that, anybody'd have a hard job stoppin' him. Bringing home a thief in bracelets ain't so common yet in Tobique that it's lost interest. Soon's they hear what's happened, you'll see a tidy little crowd jammin' inter my store, an' Wally'll be there a-waitin'."

CHAPTER XXIV.

KINGDON'S CLEVERNESS.

A very fair crowd—for Tobique—witnessed their landing and accompanied them along the single straggling street toward the general store. There must have been at least a dozen curious citizens in the throng that pressed about, all eager to gaze their fill upon the mysterious and dangerous "Black Michaud;" but Wally Johnson was not among them.

"He's waitin' on old Ezra Blund, an' couldn't break loose," explained someone in answer to Winkler's question.

Walking close behind the old man, Rex Kingdon was struggling against something like a rush of stage fright. One moment saw him eager for the appearance of Johnson and anxious for the little drama to proceed; at the next he would have given much to put it off until he could plan something better.

The worst of it was the weakness of his plan. It really wasn't a plan at all; merely a single

move, with nothing definite to back it up. It was like holding the ace of trumps without another decent card. If the surprise he hoped to spring through mistaken identity should prove to be no surprise at all—what then? In the back of his brain was a vague desire to look around, to seek out clues, to utilize an uncommonly keen sense of observation and an eye for detail. Perhaps there were some bits of evidence that might prove of determining value.

Kingdon's heart was not light as he and Kent climbed the rickety porch in the wake of the triumphal procession and entered the store. Almost immediately however a revulsion of feeling sent his head up, his chest out, and brought a glint of combat to his eyes. He was no quitter; he would not throw up the sponge before a single blow was given! Suddenly he recalled what an uncle of his, for years the head of a New York detective agency, had once told him: "If I don't have any real evidence, I bluff along until some comes my way—and nine times out of ten it comes." The same relative had likewise once remarked in the boy's hearing that, in spite of the fact that a person is always supposed innocent until proved guilty, one of the cardinal rules of

their profession was, when all clues failed, to suspect the individual who had the greatest incentive and the most frequent opportunities for committing a crime.

"I can pull a bluff as well as the next fellow," muttered the boy under his breath, "and here's where I do the pull."

Directly his whole attention was taken up by a tall, lean, slim-loined man of thirty odd, who had come hurriedly from the back of the store with a lot of miscellaneous tinware in his arms and a fussy old fellow with a stick trotting at his heels. The tall man dropped the tinware clattering on the counter and met the incoming party with a look of eager interest.

"I see you got him," he commented drawlingly.

"I reckon we hev," agreed Winkler. "This is the feller you spotted, ain't it, Wally?"

"Yep, that's Michaud, all right. I'd know him anywhere."

"Don't you mean you'd know the whiskers?" abruptly inquired Rex Kingdon, stepping boldly to Markham's side. "Seems to me this case is getting to be one of the State against a bunch of whiskers. Suppose you look again, Mr. Johnson—and look hard."

Markham's back had been toward the light, but as he spoke Rex turned him toward a window with dramatic suddenness. Holloway looked indignant and made a movement to interfere, but was checked, however, by old Winkler. "Let the boy alone," said the storekeeper. "He can't do no hurt."

As for Johnson, he stepped slowly forward, his eyes fixed in a puzzled manner upon the prisoner. For what seemed almost a full minute he stood staring intently, a strange transformation coming gradually over his face. His eyes widened, his jaw dropped, he lifted one hand and scratched his chin. At last he spoke in the bewildered undertone of one merely thinking aloud:

"Well, I'll be swizzled! You're not——"

"Quite right, I'm not!" said Dan Markham, evidently unable longer to contain himself. "I'm glad somebody's in his right senses." He turned abruptly on Sheriff Holloway. "Perhaps you'll be kind enough to take off these handcuffs now. They're hurting my wrists, and you can't be afraid of my getting away with this bunch around."

Holloway paid no attention to the plea. Bewildered and angry, he stared at Johnson.

"What in time do you mean, Wally?" he demanded. "One minute you say this fellow's Michaud, an' the next you say he ain't. You ain't been drinkin', have ye?"

"Not so you'd notice it!" retorted the trapper with some heat. "How was I to know there was two of em so much alike?"

"I don't know it yet," growled the sheriff. "All we've got to go by is your say-so. He answers every description of the Canuck."

"Except in his speech," put in Kingdon mildly. "Have you ever heard an ordinary French-Canadian talk such excellent United States, Mr. Sheriff?"

Holloway bit his lip and glared at Rex, while Winkler raised his eyebrows in comical surprise.

"By heck!" exclaimed the storekeeper. "The boy's right! I noticed that myself. He talks as good as anybody can." An expression of dismay flashed into his face and he caught the sheriff by the lapel. "Look here, Hank, what if we've got the wrong pig by the ear? My money—— Say, why don't you search him now an' see if he ain't got it on him?"

"And while you're about it," proposed Rex, "why not search everybody present who has had

an opportunity to steal that money? I don't fancy there are many here who make a practice of carrying a hundred odd dollars of their own around with them as a regular thing."

During the progress of the altercation the boy had been cudgeling his brains for that plan of action which had to be put into operation swiftly or not at all. He had not fancied that the mistake in identity was going to free the prisoner, though it must show these backwoodsmen that they had jumped too swiftly to their conclusion, and that, having been mistaken in the identity of their man, they might likewise be mistaken as to his guilt.

It was at the psychological moment of doubt and hesitation that Rex meant to put forward the suggestion that they go over the evidence again and examine the scene of the robbery for possible fresh clues. He had not, thus far, been able to fix his suspicion on anyone, but when Winkler was making the plea for an instant search of the prisoner, Rex happened to be looking at Jed Browdy, and something in that youth's heavy, hangdog face brought a sudden thoughtful wrinkle between Kingdon's eyes.

It wasn't much—merely a slight lowering of

the black brows, and the least possible twitching at one corner of the flabby mouth; but it was enough to set Rex thinking. A moment later, he made the rather absurd suggestion about searching everyone present. Watching Browdy furtively, he had his reward.

The fellow paled suddenly, and a look of alarm flashed into his eyes. He pulled himself together quickly and sent a queer searching glance at Kingdon's face. Rex did not even meet the man's look, his manner being admirably composed and indifferent. Underneath the surface, he felt a thrill of satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE AMATEUR DETECTIVE.

The search of Markham's person revealed in cash a little change, one five dollar gold piece and a silver dollar. Pop Winkler was almost in tears.

"Either he's hid it somewheres in the woods," he quavered, "or we've got the wrong man. What air we goin' to do, Hank? I can't lose all that money! Why don't you——"

"You close up and let me run this!" snapped the sheriff. He turned on Markham, gripping him by one arm. "If you're not Black Michaud, then who are you, and what are you doin' around here? Answer quick, now, with the truth."

"Oh, I'll tell you the truth," said Dan wearily. "My name's Markham, and I've been around these parts for nine months or more. As to what I'm doing, I'm trying to make an honest living, like any decent man."

"Huh!" grunted Holloway, his eyes fixed searchingly on the prisoner. "Supposin' that's so an' you ain't Michaud, there's still no reason

why you shouldn't be the feller Johnson see sneakin' out o' here at daybreak the morning the robbery was discovered."

He paused questioningly, and turned his eyes away from the prisoner long enough to dart a triumphant glance at Pop Winkler, who seemed overcome with admiration by this unexpected bit of reasoning. Markham did not answer at once, and Rex imagined what was passing in his mind. If he lied convincingly there was a fair chance of escaping, for no one here could prove him in the wrong. The boy wondered whether he would take that chance, and hoped he wouldn't. By his action in this particular strait, Markham would prove what sort of a man he was.

"Well?" questioned Holloway sharply. "I'm right, ain't I? You might have been that feller?"

Markham lifted his head and regarded the sheriff with fearless defiance. "Yes," he admitted, "I might have been, and I was. I was the person Johnson saw, but that doesn't give anybody license to call me a thief. I spent the night in Winkler's barn, and he can prosecute me for trespass if he wants to. But it's nix on this breaking and entering business. You'll have to put that on somebody else."

"A likely yarn!" sneered Holloway. "None of us wasn't born yesterday. What brought you up here at night, if not to steal?"

"I'd been over the line for supplies, and struck here about eleven. The barn door wasn't locked, so I went in and had a sleep on the hay."

In the silence that followed this statement, Holloway stared at the prisoner, irritated, yet wholly skeptical. Winkler looked uncertain. The rest of the onlookers gaped curiously. It seemed to be the moment for which Rex had been waiting, and he suddenly stepped forward and addressed Pop Winkler:

"See here, Mr. Winkler," he said, "why wouldn't it be a good idea to do a little further investigating? With this new knowledge and another point of view, perhaps we can get at something that has been overlooked; perhaps the case will assume a very different aspect."

Holloway sneered and laughed disagreeably. "We!" he mocked before the older man could speak. "You talk as if you was somebody. Where do you come in? You're only a kid."

"If you'll pardon me for being young, which is a misfortune time will correct," entreated Rex unabashed, "it is barely possible that I may be

able to render assistance or offer a suggestion worth following. An uncle of mine is head of one of the big New York detective agencies, and I know something about his methods. At least, I might give you an imitation of how a *real* detective works."

Starbuck, remaining in the background, had admired his chum's nerve all along, and now he was compelled to clap his hand over his mouth to keep from snickering aloud. "Oh, what a gall!" he whispered to himself. "He sure takes the blue ribbon. And such a flow of language! When it comes to reeling off a string of real high-class conversation, that shark has got 'em all lashed to the mast."

Of course Holloway continued to jeer at the presumptuous youngster, but when the sheriff attempted to brush Rex aside, he was opposed by Winkler.

"Hold on, Hank," protested the old man. "This is my case, ain't it? It was my money they stole, an' I reckon I got suthin' to say about gittin' it back."

"You're a fool if you let this young brat butt in and bother us."

"If bein' a fool'll git back my hundred an'

eight dollars, I ain't goin' to let that stand in the way. What is it you want to do, son?"

"I'd like to go over the place," explained Rex, "and hear how things looked when the robbery was discovered. It won't take long. If I could see the cash register first, I'd be much obliged."

Perhaps Holloway's scornful sniff had the effect of strengthening old Pop's decision and increasing his cordiality toward Kingdon; for, without hesitation, he called to Jed and led the way to the register which stood in a small partitioned space at one end of the long counter.

More than half of the loungers followed curiously, only a few remaining with the disdainful sheriff and his still manacled prisoner. Jed Browdy seemed reluctant to obey Winkler's summons, as Rex did not fail to observe. A second sharp order was needed to speed his lagging feet, and on reaching the little office, he lounged sullenly against the partition, covertly following Kingdon's movements.

The cash register was of a common type, having a single money drawer provided with a lock. That it had been locked on the night of the robbery was apparent at once, for the entire surface around the keyhole was dented and mashed

by the blows of a heavy instrument—possibly with the large monkey wrench that lay on the desk beside it.

“Is this just about as you found it, Mr. Winkler?” Rex asked presently.

“It’s so smashed I can’t use it, so I jest left it here. We was lookin’ at the wrench again this mornin’.”

“You don’t usually keep the register here, do you?”

“Why, no,” returned Winkler in evident surprise. “It’s allus out in the store—about half way down; though I don’t know how you guessed it. We only bring it in here nights.”

That which surprised the old man had been gleaned by the simplest sort of observation. The desk was a slanting one, and the register would hardly be placed at the farthest point from where the sales were made. Kingdon rapidly asked a number of other questions, all of which seemed to him so commonplace as to be almost the acme of simplicity; but, to his mild wonderment, he perceived signs of unmistakable interest on the part of his audience.

He did not realize that, unconsciously, he had assumed something of the quick, curt, business-

like manner of his uncle's staff of detectives. He had forgotten that his hearers were mostly men of little education and small experience in the ways of the world, to whom such a manner, even in a youth, was unusual and impressive in its novelty. But he was shrewd enough to see his advantage, and more in the spirit of fun than anything else, he proceeded to elaborate his characterization, making the most of every point until the performance was a real work of art.

He was not slighting the object he had in mind; he was merely handling it after a boy's less serious fashion. But, having made what he regarded as an important discovery, a rush of real gravity came over him as different from his assumed pompousness as day is from night.

The discovery concerned the wrench, which undoubtedly had been used to break open the register. This implement had not come from stock, but was Winkler's own private property, kept in a chest under the counter along with a fine assortment of other tools. The spot was dark, and the chest itself was covered completely by a section of oilcloth. To imagine a stranger entering the store for the first time on a pitch dark night and locating that chest, except by

sheer luck, was impossible. To the accustomed hand, a tilting of the lid, and a snatching of something from the well-ordered contents would be second nature.

Rex almost betrayed himself by a jubilant exclamation, stifled in time. He did not glance at Browdy, though out of the corner of his eye he saw that the fellow was near at hand. Jed must be kept in sight on some pretext or other, Rex decided, finding himself suddenly tingling with excitement and disposed to drop all the burlesque and nonsense which had diverted him a few moments ago. So far he had no real evidence against the fellow he suspected, but he meant to find some if it lay within the power of human endeavor.

"Suppose we now take a look at the window he got in by," he said briskly to Pop Winkler. "That surely ought to tell us something."

CHAPTER XXVI.

SWIFT WORK.

The store was long and low and rather dark, being lighted from the windows at the front and rear. The walls were lined with shelves on which were crowded every sort of goods in general demand by Winkler's customers. In the middle of the rear wall was a door, on either side of which a window opened. The window sills were some two and a half feet from the floor, and from the ground outside the distance was more than twice as much.

It was the one to the right of the door that had been forced open, the crude catch having been pried off by the insertion of a thin-edged instrument between the sashes. Through the glass, Rex could see the gouges made by the instrument in the soft pine.

The job had evidently been a hurried one; that was all the most careful scrutiny revealed. Disappointed, Rex stared at the window until the sun pouring through the clear panes dazzled his

eyes; then he went out into the yard behind the building to look things over.

There had been no footprints, Winkler said, on account of the drought which had preceded the last storm. An empty inverted box, taken from a shed nearby, stood under the window. Rex stepped quickly up on it and examined the window frame closely. Undoubtedly it had been forced from the outside. The boy stared at the window, his forehead a network of perplexed wrinkles; for everything seemed to contradict his theory, and unless he soon found something to support it, he must go back to face the jeers of Holloway and the other backwoodsmen. Worse yet, he would not have helped Dan Markham. He felt perfectly sure that Jed Browdy was the culprit, but without a scrap of real evidence, his opinion would be worth less than nothing.

Reluctant to give up, he continued to stare at the window, almost as if some premonition told him that the clue was there. The bright sun, shining on the glass, cast a dazzling reflection into his eyes, but still he did not turn away. At last his frown deepened, and he was on the point of giving in, when one of the men in the store

stepped close to the window and looked out at him.

The boy gave a sudden start and seemed to be gazing with a fixed stare at the man inside. Then he suddenly raised his right hand to a level with the window catch, and the fingers closed as if holding something; he stretched out his left palm toward a certain pane of glass in the attitude of steadying himself. But the man inside was puzzled to see that the outspread hand did not come within half an inch of actually touching the window. A look of triumph had wiped every emotion from Kingdon's face and, as he leaped to the ground and moved toward the door, his eyes were bright as stars.

"What's next?" inquired Winkler with some impatience. The young investigator's lack of comment had shorn the situation of much of its expected zest. "Ain't you found out anything yet?"

Apparently the boy did not hear the question. Rex had paused inside the door, and was looking about him like a person greatly interested.

"How clean everything is!" he remarked in the tone of one awakening to an unusual fact. "Do you always keep the place as neat as this?"

"Not always. We had our half-yearly scrub-up about a week ago."

"A week? That must have been the day of the robbery."

"The day before," corrected Winkler. "Jed and Pete Bartow's kid done the floor, an' I had Canuck Phil's wife in to wash the winders."

"Jed hasn't been near this window?" Rex asked with careless lightness.

"No, I ain't!" spoke up Browdy sharply. "I don't wash the winders."

"Don't you?" murmured Rex suavely. "Still, I suppose you must have examined it pretty thoroughly the day after the robbery?"

"What d'you mean, examine?" snapped Jed with an uneasy glare at Kingdon. "I looked at the catch, same as you're lookin' at it, but that's all."

"Didn't go outside and stand up on the box and look at it from there?"

"Naw!" snarled Browdy with what seemed entirely disproportionate irritation. "Why should I?"

"Oh, I thought you might. You're dead sure you didn't? All right; don't get peevish. I'm just asking all the questions I can think of, like

a real professional sleuth. Suppose we adjourn to the front of the store and let Little Sunshine favor us with the story of how he discovered the robbery."

But "Little Sunshine" suddenly displayed a decided disinclination to talk, declaring that the whole performance was "durn foolishness," and growling and protesting so continually that only through Winkler's intervention were a few bare facts dragged from him.

According to this statement, he had arrived at the store at precisely six o'clock, and on finding evidences of the robbery, had started off to inform Winkler. At the door he realized that Pop would not be up for half an hour yet, which led him to turn back, interested to find out how the thieves had made an entrance.

It was at this point that Rex, after listening with the closest attention, suddenly frowned and snapped his fingers, as if annoyed by having forgotten something that had been in his mind.

"By the way, Mr. Winkler," he said hastily, "do you happen to have any window lights in stock?"

"Lights?" wondered the storekeeper. "What size?"

"Eight by twelve will do," was the answer.

"Yep, got 'em. Jed, jest fetch—how many was it you wanted?"

"Four."

"Fetch four eight by twelve lights, an' stir your stumps."

Evidently somewhat puzzled and still uneasy, Browdy slouched back to the end of the store and bent over a bin below the counter. When he returned in the same leisurely fashion, he carried the glass carefully, his right hand protected by a sheet of tough brown paper.

At a sign from Winkler, he started to lay his load down on the counter, but before he could do so, Rex stepped back, apparently by accident, and jostled his elbow. As the glass began to slide, Jed snarled out something more forcible than polite, at the same moment grabbing at the pane on top with the flat of his left hand just in time to prevent a smash.

Rex was apologetic. "Awful clumsy of me," he drawled as the glass was deposited safely on the counter. "You don't happen to have a knife you'd lend me for a minute?"

Browdy might have refused had not Winkler admonished him to fork up in a hurry. With

grudging reluctance, he produced a knife that, for size and stoutness, would certainly have made him liable under the Sullivan law for carrying concealed weapons.

"Some toadsticker," commented Rex admiringly, as he opened the single six-inch blade. "Lucky for the burglar you weren't around with this, eh?"

Browdy made no reply. His anxiety was increasing and, seeing Kingdon walk briskly back to the window with the broken catch, he turned pale. To his amazement, and likewise the bewilderment of all who watched the boy, Rex proceeded deftly to remove one of the panes from the sash.

"Crazy as a Junebug!" commented the sheriff. "You're wastin' your time, Pop, jest as I said."

"It's my time, ain't it?" retorted Winkler pettishly. "You ain't obleeged to stay, Hank, if you got other business."

Holloway made no move to depart, and when Rex returned, carrying the pane of glass, the sheriff pretended a bored indifference; but furtively he watched the lad as closely as anyone else.

Still holding the glass he had removed from

the window, Kingdon took up one of the larger pieces from the counter, carrying both into the little office, where he was observed to examine them carefully against the light. After a few moments of inspection he placed the panes on the storekeeper's desk and came back to where Winkler leaned against the counter, with Jed behind him, the latter doing his best to stifle the apprehension that momentarily grew stronger.

"I hope you're most done, sonny," said Winkler testily, "an' likewise that you've found out somethin' by all this."

"Yes, to both questions," smiled the boy. He glanced at Browdy, shaking his head with mock seriousness. "To think that Little Sunshine could have been led from the paths of righteousness," he murmured sadly, "especially after getting off all those virtuous precepts. I regret to tell you, Mr. Winkler, that your amiable Jed is the thief. If you will look in the inside pocket of his vest, I have a notion you may find most of your money there."

CHAPTER XXVII.

HOW IT WAS DONE.

For an instant dumb amazement riveted every man in the little group. Even Browdy was momentarily paralyzed, but he was the first to recover. With blazing eyes and a face contorted with rage, he let out an inarticulate bellow of fury and leaped at the lad who had so fearlessly accused him.

Rex had rather expected such a move, and was ready for it. As Browdy rushed wildly, with both arms swinging, Kingdon stepped nimbly aside, deftly interposing a foot between Jed's sturdy legs; and the charging man went down with a terrific crash that fairly shook the building. When the prostrate man recovered from the shock he found Kingdon seated astride his body, from which position no amount of struggling served to dislodge him.

"If you want positive proof, Mr. Sheriff," called Rex earnestly, "just give me a hand.

Somebody hold this fellow's feet, please, while the sheriff searches him. I'm sure the stolen money is on his person."

The boy realized that Browdy might have hidden it somewhere else, but quick action was what he desired, and he was taking a chance. If the money should not be found on the man, he was confident that he could still convince them of Jed's guilt.

Two or three of the onlookers roused themselves and assisted in holding the panting and snarling young fellow while the sheriff, still doubtful, began the search. In a few moments he discovered something fastened with a safety pin in the inner pocket of Browdy's vest, and this proved to be a carefully done up packet containing money. Old Pop Winkler fairly danced when the packet was opened and the money counted, for it amounted to precisely one hundred and eight dollars.

"That's it!" he shouted. "By jing, Jed stole it, he did! I never thought o' him doin' it."

"I hope, Mr. Sheriff," said Kingdon with an amazing air of timidity, "that you will not consider me presumptuous if I suggest that it would

be a good plan to transfer the bracelets from Markham to the real criminal."

"That's right! That's the idee!" spluttered Winkler. "We'd better apologize to Markham, too."

Holloway tried to apologize as best he could while releasing Markham, and the handcuffs were soon transferred to the wrists of the still feebly protesting lad.

Starbuck, who had assisted in holding Browdy, gleefully congratulated his chum: "Greatest piece of real detective work I ever saw," he declared, "but I don't know how you did it."

"Nor me, neither," confessed Pop Winkler. "How'd you know he was the thief and that he had the stuff in his vest pocket?"

"I didn't," confessed the boy. "I only knew that he had something there that he was mighty choice about, because once or twice I caught him slyly feeling for it. I took a chance that it was the money."

"But what did all that monkey business with the winder glass mean?" persisted the still puzzled storekeeper. "I ain't wise to that yet."

"That was how I got my proof. He left his

trademark on the piece of glass I took out of the window. I'll show you."

Stepping quickly into the little office, he brought forth the two panes of glass and held up the smaller. Craning their necks, the woodsmen saw clearly outlined upon it the imprint of a hand, broad and muscular, and with thick, square-tipped fingers!

"That was made by the fellow who forced the window," explained Kingdon. "While prying at the window he put out his left hand to steady himself. When I first looked at the window the reflection of the sun kept me from seeing the impression of the hand, but someone came and stood behind the glass, and the thing was clear as day. It looked like Jed's hand, but —"

"Whot if it was?" weakly protested Browdy, who had slunk back against the counter. "I might 'a' made it when I was openin' the winder —er—after the robbery."

"You forget," said Rex soberly, "how positive you were not twenty minutes ago, that you hadn't been near the outside of the window since it was washed." He turned again to Winkler. "Hav-

ing found my clue, it was necessary to get another print to match. That's what I wanted the window lights for, and that's why I accidentally jostled Jed so he'd slap his left hand on the glass to keep it from slipping. He was most obliging. Here's the result. You see there's no doubt about both impressions being made by the same hand."

He held up the two sheets of glass, side by side, and the truth of his words was instantly apparent to the onlookers. Even the sheriff was compelled to utter a word of approval, and old Winkler slapped the boy heartily on the back.

"Smart, by heck!" exclaimed the storekeeper. "I never seen anythin' to beat it. Was seein' that print the fust that led you to s'picion Jed?"

"No. When I saw the tool chest I was sure the job had been done from the inside. Only by dumb luck would a stranger have found it in the dark. When it comes to that, I don't believe it was done at night, for Jed had plenty of time to pull off the trick here in the morning."

"Well," said the sheriff, "all I gotter say is that you're a heap sight smarter'n I took ye for. When Jed was a-pokin' fun at ye and you said somethin' about the feller who got the last laugh,

I never thought you'd be the one. But you kin laugh at Jed now, all right."

"Oh, no," said the boy soberly, "I can't laugh; I'm sorry for him. It's no laughing matter. Just the same, I'm glad an innocent man will not suffer."

"And I have you to thank for that!" exclaimed Markham, gripping Kingdon's hand. "I'll never forget, my boy."

"Let me say," put in Holloway, "that I hope you don't hold no grudge. I cal'lated I was doin' my duty when I nabbed you. I ain't got nothin' ag'inst ye now, though you may feel that you've got somethin' ag'inst me."

"Let's forget it," said Markham generously.

With Markham and Starbuck, Rex turned toward the door, and to his surprise, he beheld the grinning countenances of Larry Phillips, Wrenshall, Scott, Lebaude and Nipper Ware. The star of Walcott Hall athletics hailed him proudly.

"You've got old Solomon beat a mile," asserted Phillips. "Some big noise in the sleuth line. I wish we had you for quarterback on the eleven. Maybe you'd inject a little gray matter into the plays."

"Always open for offers," laughed Rex. "I'm afraid you might be disappointed, though."

"Your modesty at times is as amazing as your cheek at others," said Phillips. "I'm glad I was on hand to see the finish of this affair. Now we'll escort you back to camp in triumph."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHEN NIPPER FORGOT.

"Nipper," said Rex Kingdon in exasperation, "you're first cousin to a paradox."

"You're another!" flung back Ware indignantly. "I never had a cousin by the name of Paradox. Perhaps you mean Perkins."

"I mean," stated Rex, "that you're a contradiction. In three feet of water you swim perfectly well, but the minute you get over your head you sink. I've lost patience with you."

"Awful sorry, Rex," apologized Nipper contritely. "I'd do anything in the world to get over it, but I just can't seem to. When I know I can put my feet down and touch bottom I'm not nervous at all; but as soon as I get out of my depth, I begin to think of what would happen if I got tired or got a cramp, and it finishes me right away."

"It's the greatest case of self-hypnotism I ever saw. If you could only be placed in a position

that would force you to swim right off without thinking of yourself, I'll bet it would cure you."

"We might tow him out a couple of hundred feet in a tub," suggested Wrenshall from the shore, "and dump him. How'd that do?"

Nipper hurriedly moved nearer the beach, and Rex laughingly said:

"Probably he'd drown of sheer fright. I'm afraid that's a bit too radical. We'll have to think up some other way. Get busy, you shirker! I'm not going to have you letting up on your practice, even if you are able to go through the drill with your eyes shut."

Nipper resumed his swimming back and forth across the shoal part of the cove. His stroke was good, and he had plenty of wind and endurance. A stranger would never have supposed such an excellent swimmer could be afflicted by a positive horror of deep water.

Experience had taught Kingdon how hard the trouble was to cure, and as he swam lazily around in the clear water, he cudgeled his brains for a solution of the problem. From the shore Wrenshall and Scotty occupied themselves by hurling sarcastic comment and criticism upon the head

of Ware, in hopes that ridicule might be successful where persuasion had failed.

A week had elapsed since the events narrated in the last chapter. Having spent two days as his cousin's guest, Dan Markham had departed for Portland, eager to begin his life afresh. Doubtless Jed Browdy was suffering the penalty of his crime, but the boys had heard nothing of what had happened after their departure from the village. Their time had been entirely occupied by the daily camp life and a growing intimacy with Larry Phillips and his comrades across the lake. Everything seemed to be progressing finely save Nipper's swimming, and for even practical purposes, that was at a standstill.

Presently Kingdon swam to the beach and sprawled out beside Wrenshall and Scotty. He did not stay long and, soon after he returned to the water, the pair he had left arose and strolled away.

Nipper was rather glad to have them go, for he could not, at one and the same time, attend to his swimming and retort with proper spirit to their jibing comments. He had begun to enjoy his daily lesson in the water more than he had ever dreamed he could. It interested and pleased

him to note how his stroke improved steadily, and how he was able to swim a little further each day without tiring. He would have exulted had he been able to overcome his horror of deep water, but that was something so deeply ingrained that he feared he never should. With such a settled conviction, it was natural that he shouldn't try very hard.

A distance along the shallows had been staked off, and he had to cover it a certain number of times. He counted them as he swam, now and then making some casual remark to Rex. He was nearing the end of his task, and feeling very chipper over the fact that he was not tired at all, when suddenly he heard his name called in a strange, unnatural voice that gave him both a shock and a chill:

“Nip! Oh, Nip! I——”

Ware's feet sought the bottom. He rose, whirled and stared out on the lake. Then he choked with horror. Not a hundred feet from shore, Kingdon was struggling in the water—struggling with a desperation which struck terror to Nipper's heart. His arms were beating the water like flails; his face was distorted and

his eyes appeared to bulge. To the watching boy it seemed that Rex could barely keep himself afloat.

"Help!" the latter gasped faintly. "Get the—boys, Nip! Cramp!"

For another second Nipper stood like a pile driven deep in the sand. Breaking the spell at last, he splashed shoreward, frantically screaming as he went:

"Help! Help! Dick! Scotty! Quick! Rex is drowning! Help!"

Floundering through the shallow water, he reached the shore without receiving an answer. Still crying out, he raced on to the top of the slope, where the appeal died in his throat; for there was not a soul in sight. Filled with panicky despair, he turned to stare back at the lake and saw Kingdon's head just slipping out of sight beneath the rippling water. Rex was drowning, and he was doing nothing to save him!

With an incoherent sound that was half cry and half sob, he bounded madly down the slope, tore through the shallow water, flung himself forward and swam—swam with every atom of strength he could put into his strokes—straight

out toward the spot where the blond head of his friend had disappeared.

The head came up just as he reached the place, cleaving the water with a silence and suddenness that gave the boy a shock. Like a flash Ware clutched the thick, yellow mass of hair with one hand, turned shoreward immediately and struck out manfully with the other hand and his two legs.

He had heard that this was the way to rescue an unconscious person from the water, but he had not imagined how difficult the feat would be. For a time he seemed to make no progress whatever, Kingdon's body being a dead weight that dragged him down and impeded his movements.

"I must get him in," he thought. "If I fail, there's no one else. I've just got to do it!"

He did not think of himself; not for a moment since starting, seemingly without his own volition, to save the friend he esteemed above all others, had any risk he must face caused him to falter a hair. The water was very deep out there, and he knew it, having seen some of the boys try vainly to "sound"; but had it been deeper than the fathomless ocean, it could not have made him quail a whit in this emergency.



Like a flash Ware clutched the thick, yellow mass of hair
with one hand.—*Page 260.*

At last he could touch bottom. Catching Kingdon under the arms, he staggered through the shallow water and dragged him up on the beach. He knew the body should be rolled over something, but he was appalled to realize that he had forgotten whether it ought to lie face downward or face upward. In the brief moment of hesitation that followed, Kingdon's lids quivered and, to Nipper's intense relief, he suddenly began to cough and sputter. Soon he was able to sit up and gaze somewhat groggily about him.

"I caught a cramp, didn't I?" he muttered. "Who brought me in?"

Nipper flushed faintly. "I—I did," he stammered.

Kingdon stared at him incredulously. "You!" he exclaimed. "Why, you'd be scared to death if you had to swim half that distance."

"I—I guess I must have forgotten to be scared," faltered Ware in an embarrassed tone.

For a few moments Rex continued to stare queerly at his companion. "It's a good hundred feet," he said at last. "And you swam out there and brought me in by the—er—how did you bring me in?"

"I had hold of your topknot," explained Ware.

"Brought me in by the topknot, which would have been no cinch for even an experienced swimmer. But it was something like an accident; you said you forgot to be scared. You couldn't do it again in a thousand years. You couldn't swim out there and back by yourself, to say nothing about bringing in a drowning man."

Rex had seized the psychological moment to rouse Nipper by the spur of doubt and ridicule that had hitherto left him unmoved. The little chap actually glared at the fellow he had rescued, all the resentment of his nature set boiling.

"Accident, was it?" he snarled savagely. "How do you know so much, Smarty? You were stiff as a pickled herring, and you didn't know anything about it. Couldn't do it again, hey? Oh, couldn't I? Well, I'll show you! Just you watch me, Mr. Know-it-all!"

"Hold on!" cried Rex as Nipper jumped up and started for the water. "Better not try it till you're rested. It's away over your head, you know."

"What do I care if it is!" shouted Ware furiously. "I saved your life, and then you sneer at me! Keep off! Don't try to stop me! I'll show

you, you conceited wonder of the world! I'll make you take it all back."

Into the water he dashed until it was up to his waist, and then, launching himself forward, he swam straight out toward the spot where Kingdon had been struggling a little while before. Delighted with the success of his stratagem, Kingdon swam out also, keeping a short distance behind the pupil whose lessons had borne fruit at last. And when Nipper had gone some distance further out than before, the satisfied instructor called to him:

"That's enough, old man. You don't have to swim across the lake. I'll swallow all I said. Come on back before I catch another cramp."

Nipper turned at once. "What are you doing out here, anyhow?" he demanded. "I don't need you paddling after me. I can take care of myself."

"Oh, you're cocky now," returned Rex; "but wait till to-morrow—you'll be so scared again that anybody won't be able to drive you ten feet from shore with a loaded gun."

"If I am," shouted Ware, "I'll take the gun and shoot myself!"

Reaching shallow water, he waded out with the air of one decidedly injured; and suppressing his inward laughter, Kingdon followed, confident that Nipper had been completely cured at last.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FRIENDSHIP'S HAND REFUSED.

They had dressed and reached the cabin, Nipper continuing to be somewhat indignant and resentful, before Wrenshall and Scotty turned up with the somewhat lame explanation that they had gone off to look for Baudie and Starbuck, but had failed to find them. They exclaimed loudly on hearing Kingdon's account of the rescue, and immediately christened Nipper "Life-saver." Their praise and congratulations were extravagant, but held a teasing, bantering undercurrent which continued to annoy Ware. He did not want to be made a marvel, but it did seem as if they took the whole affair with extraordinary carelessness.

"They don't seem to realize," he thought, "that if it hadn't been for me, Rex might have drowned. S'pose they think, too, that I'll be scared again to-morrow. We'll see about that!"

Nor did he relax much toward Kingdon, although once or twice Rex took Ware's part

against the joshing of the other two, but this was done in a laughing, careless manner that did not seem like the gratitude to be expected from one whose life had been saved. There was something about the affair that continued to irritate the star of the performance.

When the two other fellows showed up, Nipper was presently made aware of the existence of some secret joke. There was much immoderate laughter—there is nothing more irritating to the person who is not in on the affair—and more of the “Lifesaver” josh Wrenshall had started, until finally Ware grew so cross and indignant that, after dinner, he slipped away to cool off.

An hour's brisk tramp through the woods accomplished that result, and satisfied him that he had been a chump to let himself be ruffled by what was nothing more than the ordinary run of joshing give-and-take. He didn't want to pose as a hero; nothing could be more distasteful. He hadn't rescued Rex for praise, but because he had to. He really didn't deserve any credit at all for being dominated by an impulse he couldn't have resisted if he had tried.

It was in this state of mind that he returned

through the trees back of the cabin. Even before reaching the clearing, he heard the chatter of voices, punctuated by laughter. Without halting, his mind made up to carry it off easily and meet jest with counter jest, he was moving around the chimney end of the cabin when all at once a phrase in Wrenshall's voice stopped him in his tracks:

"——greatest joke you ever knew, and now Nip thinks he's a heroic lifesaver."

Ware caught his breath, an expression of bewildered amazement creeping into his eyes.

"Tell us," urged the voice of Larry Phillips.

"Rex has been teaching him to swim," explained Dick Wrenshall, "but he was afraid to go into deep water. So——"

"He couldn't do it," interposed Kingdon. "He was ducked and nearly drowned when he was a kid, and the impression stuck. I got him so he could swim all right in the shallows, but the minute it was over his head, down he went every time. I knew if he once swam in deep water, even a little way, he'd be all right. That was why I sent away the fellows and then faked a cramp. He thought I was drowning, and he had

to come out after me or watch me perish before his eyes.”

“Splashed out there like a little hero and grabbed Rex by the hair,” laughed Wrenshall. “I’ll bet he pulled out a handful or two, didn’t he? It was a circus seeing him coming back, puffing and blowing—Jim and I were looking on from the bushes—with Rex, supposed to be unconscious, helping him along by a leg stroke now and then. We near died laughing——”

Nipper heard no more of the speech. His face was burning and his eyes were bright with tears of rage. So the whole thing had been a trick, with nothing real about it! He recalled his feelings when he thought Rex was drowning, and at that moment he hated them all—Kingdon more than any of the others. In a dumb daze he realized that Rex was speaking again:

“Wren’s got a rather crude sense of humor, as you can see, Larry. Personally I don’t see anything so wildly mirthful in this affair. It was all real to the kid. He did a mighty fine thing and I’m proud of him. I hated to play such a trick, but it seemed to be the only way to cure him, and it surely worked. He won’t be bothered any more by lack of confidence in the water.”

Nipper did not wait to hear anything further, but withdrew silently, as he had come. He was still flushed, but his anger, especially against Rex, was melting away. After all, the trick had been performed for his own special benefit, and he'd really come out ahead; for he was certain Kingdon was right in saying he would never again lack confidence in the water. Surely for that blessing he could take a little passing jolly.

Later, when Ware joined the others on the point, his irritation had worn down to a slight grudge against Dick Wrenshall for making rather too much of the affair. With a mental note to gratify this grudge in the near future, he was able to face the badinage that greeted him, and he took it with such good grace that presently the boys let up in favor of something more entertaining.

As he had come over alone, Phillips was persuaded without much difficulty to stay to supper. Rex suspected an underlying seriousness when the visitor laughingly remarked that he sometimes got sick of the bunch across the lake.

"They don't mix well," Phillips explained. "Melchor isn't a bad chap, but Durand's stuck up and afraid of soiling his clothes. Brigham's

got a nice cheerful grouch, Vickers is a crank, and the rest are just kids."

"Jolly crowd," laughed Rex. "You must be having the time of your life."

"Happy as a clam in hot water," chuckled Phillips. "But it's bad for my nerves, and I came over here to take the rest cure. What sort of a chap is Brigham, anyhow? Does he always go round with a battle-ax face and a chip on his shoulder, or is he sometimes half human?"

The muscles of Kingdon's jaw hardened a bit, for he had not forgotten Brigham's treachery in the matter of the paddles, nor did he think he ever should. He might keep it to himself, but he could not forgive the deed. He could not remember ever having been so intensely and lastingly bitter against anyone; but it seemed to him, considering everything that had happened since their first meeting, that Brigham was a fellow without a single redeeming quality,—mean, treacherous and quite beyond the pale.

"I really don't know him well, Larry," Rex answered stiffly. "To be frank, I love him like a dose of aconite."

"So I judged," said Phillips dryly; "and the feeling, I imagine, is reciprocated. Still, you

must have noticed whether this sulkiness is normal. Not that it matters much, for in the past week we've hardly seen him at all. He spends most of his time off alone in the woods."

"You should worry and lose your sleep! When he gets over it he'll come around and tell you how to run things. That's him."

"Yes he will—not! If he tries that, I'll tell him something, and I'm a fancy teller when I start telling."

The talk shifted to other subjects. Presently, when Baudie and Scott entered the cabin to prepare supper, Phillips accompanied them. Proud of his culinary ability, he had promised to instruct the Canadian lad in a new method of making flapjacks. Having done this to his satisfaction and returned to the group outside the doorway, he found that Kingdon was not with them.

"Out on the point, I reckon," he thought, catching sight of a head moving beyond a fringe of bushes.

Having taken a step or two in that direction, he discovered that the person was Starbuck, who had gone to the lake for a pail of water. An instant later a clear, liquid, birdlike call from the

woods behind the cabin brought Phillips round, a glint of interest in his eyes.

"A hermit thrush!" he muttered. "And I've never clapped eyes on one of the brutes."

Eager to obtain a glimpse of the shy inmate of the forest whose delicious note he had heard more than once during his stay at the lake, Larry moved cautiously round the cabin and through the trees growing close up to the rear.

The call sounded again, sweet as the music of a golden bell. It was answered by another, different note, which seemed to come from a little further away.

"Two of them!" thought Phillips. "Now, if only they don't scare off before I get my blinkers on them——"

Cautiously thrusting aside a thick hemlock branch, he paused and suddenly became rigid, gazing with puzzled eyes at a picture across the glade. Motionless against a background of hemlock and gleaming white birches, stood Kingdon. His head was tipped backward; his eyes were fixed on the upper branches of a near-by tree; his lips were pursed oddly, and from them issued a series of those sweet liquid notes. So close, almost, as to resemble an echo, the other, fainter,

answer thrilled through the woods. Again Rex called, and the amazed onlooker saw a slim shape of mottled gray and brown flitting timidly down from limb to limb.

It was the female thrush! Phillips scarcely dared breathe for fear of frightening her away. Almost incredulous, he watched her reach the lower limb and hesitate while the call, in exact imitation of that made by the male bird, rippled from Kingdon's lips. Then the fascinated feathered creature fluttered from the limb, and for an instant the spectator of the little drama believed she would alight on the shoulder of the lad who had decoyed her in such a marvelous manner. But she flitted away and vanished, with a final note of farewell.

Evidently the show was over, for at once Rex turned to retrace his steps to the cabin. Phillips stepped out to meet him.

"I knew you were a bird," he said, "but I didn't know you could talk their language. By Jove! that was a slick performance. Wish I could do it. Give me a lesson."

"Help!" laughed Rex. "Teaching Nipper Ware to swim is job enough, but this would be harder. I don't want another pupil, thank you."

"Stingy!" taunted Larry. "Let me get my hands on you, and I'll——"

Rex fled to the cabin, Phillips pursuing, and the affair ended in a good-natured scuffle.

But Larry was too curious to let the matter drop there. After supper, he sought out Starbuck and began to ask questions.

"Imitate a thrush!" exclaimed Kent. "That's nothing much for him. Haven't you seen him —— Oh, I forgot; you've never been off in the woods with him. There isn't much in the way of wild creatures that he can't call around him."

"I suppose he can call a squirrel?" said Phillips, with a grin.

"But not the way you mean; he doesn't climb a tree and talk nutty. You didn't get a chance to spring that stale one, did you? Honestly, I've seen him get a big gray squirrel up within three feet of him, and then send him off so mad at the fake that you could hear him chattering half a mile. Going for a walk with Rex in the woods is one of the most amusing things I know of."

"Must be," agreed Phillips. "He'll have to show me some more in this line—to-morrow, too."

As it happened, however, the press of other matters caused him to forget this purpose. Directly after breakfast they all took to the canoes and paddled across to the other camp to spend the day. They had scarcely landed, and the hilarious welcome of the other party had barely begun to subside, when Rex, happening to be standing alone a little way off from the rest, was surprised to see Brigham suddenly appear before him exactly as if he had been waiting to seize the opportunity. His face was set and hard; his eyes did not meet Kingdon's squarely. For a few seconds he stood furtively moistening his lips with his tongue, and when he spoke his voice was hoarse and rather low.

"See here, Kingdon," he said, "I'm sorry about what—what happened the other day. I wish you'd—forget it and—and shake hands."

Rex regarded him scornfully. He had made a failure, and now he would pretend friendship in order that he might have the better chance to put over some new underhanded trick. Kingdon's face colored with a rush of the same bitter anger Brigham had aroused in him before.

"I haven't quite so short a memory," he re-

torted. "And I keep my hands clean for my friends."

Bruce caught his underlip between his teeth and, raising his head with a jerk, looked at Rex for an instant with eyes that were full of regret. Then, without another word, he turned slowly and walked away.

CHAPTER XXX.

TROUBLED BY REGRET.

Rex stared after Brigham, a dull red darkening his tan. The words had no more than passed his lips than he regretted them, realizing that they sounded like the speech of a stage hero in a cheap melodrama. It would have seemed more manly had he taken Brigham's apology at its face value, even though deceived. He was uncomfortably conscious that he had acted the part of a prig, even before Bruce raised his eyes and gave him that quick look of regret.

Meeting that glance, Rex was more than half convinced that the chap had been actually in earnest—had meant every word he said—and more; and this made Kingdon tenfold more uncomfortable. What had seemed surliness was possibly the natural embarrassment of a fellow to whom apologies of any sort were not common, and like many another of similar temperament, he had veiled diffidence and uncertainty with curt-

ness. Instead of meeting him decently, Rex had given him a figurative slap in the face.

Troubled, angry with himself, at last ashamed, Kingdon finally started to walk slowly in the direction Bruce had taken. He did not know just what he meant to do, and he had not taken a dozen steps before Phillips swooped down on him and gathered him in for a water bout with the spears.

After a moment's hesitation, Kingdon went with him reluctantly. He could not very well decline on the plea that he wanted to apologize to the chap he had spoken of only yesterday with the most uncompromising bitterness. He didn't know that he was ready to apologize. He wasn't at all sure he knew what he wanted to do, except at this moment he had no taste for the battle with the sponge-tipped lances.

It was natural that he should acquit himself poorly, for the game was one in which inattention invited failure, and most of the time he was trying to pick out Brigham among the spectators. The swimming race which followed did not arouse his complete interest, and when it was over and he had dressed, his mind returned to distasteful meditation.

"It was a nice gentlemanly thing for me to do!" he muttered after frowning over it for fifteen minutes. "I'm so proud of it that I'd like to kick myself, and I'll look Brig up and tell him so."

He had imagined Bruce might be in his tent, but that was empty, and an inquiry of Phillips elicited the information that Brigham was not about the camp at all.

"He beat it to the woods two hours or more ago," Larry stated. "That's what he does 'most every day. Dell says he's made friends with a bunch of lumbermen back yonder, and I suppose he finds them better company than we are."

Kingdon did not believe Bruce had taken to the woods in search of more congenial company. In fact, the fancy had come to him that Brigham's apparent grouch was not a grouch at all, but simply the outward manifestation of unhappiness.

The morning had been close and stifling, but while they were at dinner a breeze sprang up and swiftly grew into something like a gale.

During the meal, Phillips discoursed about Walcott Hall and the life there, and he continued it afterward. He could not have chosen a topic

better calculated to interest Kingdon, for Rex had become deeply absorbed in Larry's tales of the school, its fine system, its athletics, its mellowed traditions, its corking set of fellows. It was the sort of talk—for Phillips was an unconscious press agent—which made a majority of the listeners want to rush off and persuade their parents to enter them there forthwith for the fall term. Its effect on Kingdon was surprising because of the fact that Rex had hitherto shown no enthusiasm whatever for any system of education. His faculties along certain lines were very highly developed, but the lines were those which interested him; on most other subjects he was painfully uninformed.

Perhaps the months he had recently spent among the wholesome, normal lads of a prosperous country village had brought about a change in the boy whose life, before that, had been one long round of hotels and lodgings in every quarter of the globe with his scientific father. At all events there was a change, and more and more he wanted to go to Walcott Hall. But there was one big obstacle: his father would not let him, he felt sure. It would not be from lack of means, but because of his own crass ignorance

of mathematics and the rudiments of English grammar. He was clever in many other departments, but those two subjects he had never even studied until he came to Ridgewood. He had spoken of this now, and was wondering whether boning hard for the remainder of the summer would do any good, when he became aware of a sudden excitement among the boys around him.

"I tell you it's a fire!" exclaimed Tug Melchor positively. "It's a good ways off and not very big yet, but with this wind——"

Rex rose to his feet and turned to follow the direction of many pairs of eyes. Their position near the edge of the stream afforded them a narrow but extended view of a stretch behind the camp. Looking along the straight path of water, they could see several miles of rolling and thickly wooded land which was backed by a bold ridge of mountains. On the lower slopes of that ridge, a small column of smoke rose, was seized by the wind, and torn into a thousand fragments.

Some of the boys regarded it as trivial, and several laughed and talked about a bonfire. Rex did not smile, however, for he was thinking of the miles of "slash"—great heaps of pine tops and branches spread in the wake of the lumber-

men who were operating on this side of the lake. He had seen those waste lands only a few days before, and had thought of what would follow if this bone-dry mass ever caught fire. Now the fire had appeared, and, though it was a mile or more away, the wind was in just the right quarter to drive it down on the inflammable tinder. Rex glanced at Phillips and found the big fellow's eyes fixed on his face.

"Some fire, eh?" hazarded Larry. "I've never seen a forest fire on a frolic, so I don't know what they're like at the start."

"It'll be some frolic if it isn't stopped soon. Remember the mass of slash we saw over back of the lumber camp the other day?"

Phillips' eyes narrowed. "I should say I do! Nice fodder for a blaze. It would carry off their camp and everything else. Do you think there's a chance of the fire getting that far?"

"Ten chances to one unless the wind changes."

"Wough! What do you say if we go upstream, fellows? If there's going to be any excitement I'd like to take a hand. Camp's safe enough, isn't it, Rex, old boy? No danger of getting burned out of house and home while we're gone?"

Rex hesitated. "With a fire in the woods, you can't ever tell what will happen. Still, I don't see why we shouldn't chase up-stream a ways and see what's doing. If it looks bad we can hike back again and break camp."

"It's a go," said Phillips. "The old scow's here, and it wouldn't take ten minutes to stack everything up in her and pull out into the lake. Come on, everybody. Here's some real excitement at last."

His tone aroused even those who regarded the thing as trivial, and there was a rush to get paddles and to pile into the canoes. Before taking to the water, Rex glanced again at the distant fire, and was astonished to note that, even in that brief time, the column of smoke had quadrupled in volume. Instead of dissipating as it rose into the air, it was now driven forward, a thick, ragged streamer, by the furious wind.

"There won't be a thing doing when it strikes that slash!" muttered Kingdon under his breath.

Having no desire to be called a croaker, he did not express his apprehension aloud; but he knew what was almost sure to come, and most of the others did not. Laughing and joshing, they piled into the canoes and put out upon the stream.

They had not gone more than a couple of hundred yards when, all at once, Chub Taffinder set up a wailing lament:

“There’s thirteen of us! That’s awful bad luck. I’m afraid something’s going to happen.”

“Thirteen!” echoed Melchor. “Why, there ought to be—— Oh, Brig isn’t here. Where is he, anyhow, fellows—where’s Brig?”

Several answered him at once, and Rex frowned slightly as he listened. For a space he had forgotten Brigham and his ungenerous treatment of the chap, but now he remembered him with an uncomfortable stab of regret. Brig had gone away into the woods, and the woods on this afternoon were not safe to wander in at random.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FOREST FIRE.

Phillips promptly squelched Taffinder by telling him to cut out his superstitious nonsense. The canoes swept on up-stream, and for some distance the boys could still see the fire with its thickening billows of smoke and swiftly widening area. Finally an abrupt turn in the stream caused serried ranks of tall pines to blot out any extended view.

For a mile or more they paddled on, the younger boys joking and laughing with a touch of that nervous shrillness which excitement usually brings. Having lost sight of the fire, there was nothing in the appearance of the surrounding forest to tell them that there was such a thing within a hundred miles; but they had imaginations with which to picture any degree of danger they pleased. There was a really pleasant thrill in thinking of what might lie beyond those barriers of silent forest giants. It was even

possible to work up a nice little feeling of pride at their own courage in going forward so boldly.

Then all at once a whiff of smoke was wafted through the forest aisles, and at once everyone began to sniff. Their efforts were quickly rewarded, for in what seemed an incredibly short time, the sharp tang of burning pine was everywhere. Except for a faint haze, there was no smoke visible, but the hilarious members of the crowd relapsed into silence, casting nervous glances to right and left through the forest which seemed to have suddenly grown ominously still. Now and then they looked backward with what was close to longing, and the impetuous briskness of their paddling became noticeably modified.

Phillips and Kingdon, affected in precisely the opposite fashion, began to laugh and jest.

"What's the matter, Chub?" inquired the former, observing the fat boy's frequent glances. "Lost something?"

"Only his muscle," laughed Rex. "Anything suggestive of heat always makes Taffy wilt."

Crude as it was, it served to spur the paddlers on again.

"What do you think about it, Rex?" Phillips

asked in a low tone. "We don't want to make fools of ourselves and get into a hole. Is it safe to go as far as the lumber camp! I'd like to see what the men there are going to do."

"Let's keep on. It's not more than half a mile, and we've hardly begun to see the smoke yet."

The stream had grown quite narrow, but they knew it could be navigated by canoe all the distance to the lumber camps. Soon, however, smoke began to drift through the trees in a constantly increasing volume that set the boys choking and sputtering. Still they did not turn back, and Phillips finally stopped his canoe within a hundred yards of the landing place used by the timber cutters.

"Jingo!" he exclaimed. "It's getting bad, Rex. What do you think about——"

"I don't understand it," interrupted Kingdon, perplexed. "Doesn't seem as if the fire could have got here so quickly, and the lumber crowd hasn't even started to get out. That's their scow tied up to the bank, isn't it?"

Phillips nodded, and they paddled a little closer. A small, flat-bottomed scow used by the rivermen when getting logs down in the spring was

fastened to a tree. A moment later the boys made out the figure of a man bending over something on the bank. Through the smoke the man saw them.

"Hi, you fellows!" he called. "Come on and help out."

The canoes were brought alongside the scow, which was heaped with dunnage, tools, supplies, and all sorts of miscellaneous portable property that the fellow had evidently carried down from the bunk house and other buildings.

"What's doing?" asked Phillips. "Where's the rest of your crew?"

"Makin' back fire," explained the lumberman, drawing one grimy hand across his sweaty forehead. "It may stop the other. They got a good place about half a mile yonder, but they need men mighty bad. There's tools aplenty, if you've a mind to help. One of your crowd is in there now."

Phillips hesitated, glancing thoughtfully at the boys behind him.

The lumberman's lips curled. "Afraid?" he drawled sarcastically.

Larry gave him a look. "Oh, yes," he retorted, "frightened stiff. You're pretty brave yourself,

aren't you? Takes real courage to load this scow the way you're doing."

"Somebody had to do that," growled the fellow.

But, without troubling to listen, Phillips turned to his comrades, his face flushed and his eyes bright.

"I'm game, for one," he said grimly; "but some of you can't go. The kids, anyhow, are out of this. Chub, Roddy and Shrimp have got to stay here, and Nipper had better keep 'em company."

A protesting clamor arose, but it was swiftly stilled when Kingdon supported Phillips; and together they arbitrarily settled the matter in short order. The four younger chaps remained behind, as did Vickers, Lebaude and Durand.

"If the smoke thickens much, the kids had better start on down-stream without waiting for us," advised Kingdon.

"Correct," agreed Phillips. "And the rest of you needn't delay too long, even if we don't show up. We might be cut off from you, or something. Now, old top, where are the tools you were talking about?"

From the scow the woodsman produced a number of heavy hoes with sharpened edges. Each

boy caught up one and started off through the woods at a trot.

"I s'pose we're fools to get roped into this," said Phillips as he and Rex ran together; "but, somehow, I couldn't help volunteering."

"That was right," declared Kingdon quickly. "In the woods, a chap who refuses to fight fire is called a coward. Out West they can take men out of factories, or anywhere they choose, and force them to do fire duty."

"Then hooray for the volunteers!" laughed Phillips. "Did you hear what that fellow said about one of our fellows being here already? If he was right, it must be Brig."

"How'd you guess? It couldn't be anybody else."

The smoke grew chokingly thick, and presently, as they reached the place where the lumbermen were working, they saw the reason why. The most of it came not from the principal fire, but from the backfire that had been started in the hope of burning over a stretch in the track of the big blaze that would be too wide for the flames to leap. The idea was to keep this smaller blaze under control by constantly beating out the front line of fire and letting the other burn back

against the wind. The method was practicable, but to-day the wind was so high and the available fighting force so small that it was a constant struggle to keep the fire they had started for protection from leaping the bounds and swiftly becoming a new engine of destruction.

As the boys came running up, dim figures were seen through the smoke working feverishly with hoes and mattocks. One of them, the foreman, straightened up and welcomed the reinforcements with an exclamation of satisfaction. He was blackened by smoke and dirt and streaming perspiration until he looked like a colored man. Without asking how they happened to be there, he divided the party, sending a half to each end of the long line.

Those lads fell to work like men; and it was the work of men to wield the hoes, clawing out those licking little flames that fed greedily on the bone-dry needles and débris. There was no let-up, even for an instant, lest the fire break through and get beyond control. The smoke choked them and the heat blistered their hands. Sweat burst from every pore in streams and made little wriggling channels on their sooty faces.

Presently Rex, separated from the others, found himself working beside one of the lumbermen, and a sudden thought came to him.

"Where's the other fellow—Brigham?" he asked abruptly.

"Over yonder, last I knew."

The man jerked his head to the right, and through the smoke and red glow of flames, Kingdon could see three more figures working at the extreme end of the line. He lost them presently, for, with a sudden unexpected shifting of the wind, he had to work frantically to keep the fire from bursting through a new place. On the heels of that he became conscious of a dull ominous roaring from the north-east, a sound that struck chill apprehension to his heart; for it told him that, having reached the slashings, the main fire was eating through the mass with a velocity which made their puny little backfire seem to move with the crawling slowness of a snail.

It seemed that the back fire had been started too late to accomplish the purpose desired. It seemed a hundred-to-one shot that the approaching monster of destruction would easily leap the wide swath of burned territory intended to stop it. Rex passed a hand across his forehead to wipe

away the blinding sweat, and he perceived Brigham laboring with the men some distance away as a gust lifted the smoke for an instant. Then the pall closed down again. If Bruce could stick at it like that, Rex wasn't going to quit, and he resumed work. An instant later the man beside him flung down his hoe.

"It's comin', kid!" he shouted thickly. "Run!"

That was what he did, and in a moment he was out of sight. With set teeth, Rex plied his hoe mechanically for a few seconds before he saw the three figures on his right drop their implements and start toward the river. The roaring had increased, and the smoke was thickening with each passing moment. It was folly to stay longer, and so, tossing aside the useless hoe, Rex turned and stumbled away through the trees.

He tried to follow a course parallel with that taken by the trio, of whom he knew Brigham to be one, keeping track of them as well as he could through the swirling clouds of smoke. Consequently, when he beheld only two emerge in sight from behind a clustered jungle of evergreens, he cut across their path at once.

"Where's Brigham?" he cried.

"Just behind," answered one of them breathlessly.

But Brigham was not in sight, and all at once Kingdon was attacked by a horrible fear that something was wrong. Immediately he stopped short, turned and ran back toward that inferno.

"Brig!" he called wildly. "Brig, where are you?"

He heard no answer. The smoke, swirling around the boy, seemed to isolate him. Through the trees he saw flecks of murky crimson that moved and winked like demon eyes in a gray mask, and the air struck his face hot as the draft from a blast furnace. He ran forward a dozen steps further. Something crashing through the bushes made his heart leap with hope, but it was a fleeing deer, with wide, frightened eyes and dilated nostrils. Rex called again:

"Brig! Where are you?"

This time, to his intense relief, there came a muffled answer off to the left. Rushing that way, to his astonishment he beheld Bruce standing motionless with his back against the trunk of a huge pine.

"What are you waiting for?" gasped Kingdon. "Don't you see it's coming? Don't you

know there's barely time for us to make the river?"

Brigham looked at him oddly. "I know," he said in a choked and shaking voice. "You'd better get out in a hurry, too. I've sprained my ankle, and I can barely hobble on it."

CHAPTER XXXII.

FORGIVEN.

For a fraction of a second, Kingdon gazed at Bruce in unspeakable dismay. Then his glance momentarily sought the crimson flecks that splashed the murky twilight, growing swiftly larger as they rushed forward.

"Can't you walk on it at all?" cried Rex aghast.

"I'll try again," said Brig.

But when he attempted to take a step, he plunged, crashing, forward upon his face. Sitting up, he turned his fear-stricken eyes toward the other boy.

"No use!" he gasped. "Might as well be broken!"

"I'll have to help you," said Rex, dragging the helpless fellow to his feet.

Bruce was too heavy to be carried save in one way, and Kingdon turned his broad back and bent over slightly.

"Get up!" he ordered. "Get up, I say! You

don't want to loaf around here and be roasted, do you?"

With faint objection, Brigham clasped his arms around Kingdon's neck, and Rex caught his legs and hoisted him into place. There was a heave, a cracking of muscles, and turning his face toward where he thought the stream must be, the determined rescuer resumed his staggering flight beneath his heavy human burden.

What followed speedily became more of a dreadful nightmare than reality. Strangled, gasping, groping his way forward, Rex had an awful sense of progressing at a snail's pace, knowing all the while that the pursuing fire was coming on at almost the speed of a railroad train. The smoke grew thicker, more choking. He could hear the crackling of the flames, and presently the forest was lit up with a lurid glow. The heat became blistering, smothering, deadly.

At first he tried to run, but that was soon shown to be impossible, for Brig was too heavy; and as the minutes passed, that weight seemed to grow even greater and more crushing. Once Bruce urged Rex to put him down and save himself, but Kingdon snapped back a refusal. His face set in the dogged, indomitable lines of one

who would never give in while there was a particle of strength left in his body, he panted on. The roaring and crackling of the flames filled his ears, and the heat seemed to be singeing his hair and blistering his skin.

Mechanically he plodded onward, his brain becoming more dulled with each suffocating breath he drew. He began to have queer fancies: Bruce was dead! He had driven him to his death by unkindness! But why was he so heavy! Why did that load grow and grow until his legs wobbled weakly beneath the weight of it?

Suddenly a sound—half gasp, half cry—from Bruce aroused him. He caught a glimpse of some log buildings, and into his dazed mind came the realization that they had reached the lumbermen's camp. The river was just beyond—the blessed river!

A mass of flame, splashing down like a great drop, told that above their heads the trees were blazing. Showers of sparks and glowing twigs fell all around them, and the roaring furnace seemed at their very heels. Summoning his last ounce of strength for the mighty effort, Rex began to run. Fortunately the ground sloped downward now, and that helped. The smoke was so

thick he couldn't see three yards ahead. Reaching the river bank, he plunged into the water with a tremendous splash. When he came up, Brigham was not far away.

"All right?" choked Rex.

"All right!" sputtered Brigham.

Then, like magic, two canoes appeared beside them, and the voice of Larry Phillips cried:

"Pile in here, one of you! Nipper can take the other. The water isn't more'n three feet deep here. Be lively."

Rex helped Brigham into Phillips' canoe and lost no time about getting himself into the one occupied by Nipper Ware, after which both paddlers settled down to the business of pulling away from there as fast as they could. For a time the whole world above them seemed to have turned a glaring crimson, but, drawing away from the danger zone, at last they were able to breathe more freely, and the paddlers slightly relaxed their furious efforts.

"That kid of yours ought to be spanked," Phillips called to Rex. "I sent 'em all down-stream and was waiting for you two when I saw him sneaking back in that canoe. He'd put Ballard in with two others, and he said he came back be-

cause he couldn't go away and leave you in the woods."

"I'm no kid!" snarled Ware resentfully. "I'm sick of being called a kid! Think I'm going to leave Rex——"

"You're no kid," agreed Kingdon. "You're a man, Nipper! Give me that paddle and let me do a little work now."

"Work!" exploded Brigham in a queer voice. "Don't you call toting me half a mile—work? That's what he did, Larry! I fell and sprained my ankle—and thought I was done for. But he came back and took me on his back and carried me pretty near half a mile. And I weigh almost a hundred and seventy."

Phillips gave a low whistle. "That settles it," he cried. "A chap who can do that isn't going to be lost to our football team if I can help it. I'm going to get you into Walcott Hall this fall if I have to rope and tie you and tote you there on *my* back. Get me?"

"Got you, Steve," laughed Rex. "But you won't have to go to all that trouble. If I can find somebody to coach me up on Math, so I'll make a half way decent showing, I'll enter."

"Math!" chortled Phillips. "Cinch! That's

the kind of food I eat from choice. Soon as we get home I'll take you in hand, and if I can't fit you for Walcott in six weeks, then you must have a head of solid ivory."

He kept his promise and, Kingdon's head being of a normal composition, the result of the tuition was happy for everybody. Rex entered the famous preparatory school in September. An account of his first year there will be found in the third of the Twentieth Century Boys' Series, the title of which is: "Rex Kingdon at Walcott Hall."

Reaching their camp, they found the remainder of the crowd busily engaged in taking down tents and packing their belongings into the flat-bottomed scow preparatory to seeking refuge on the lake.

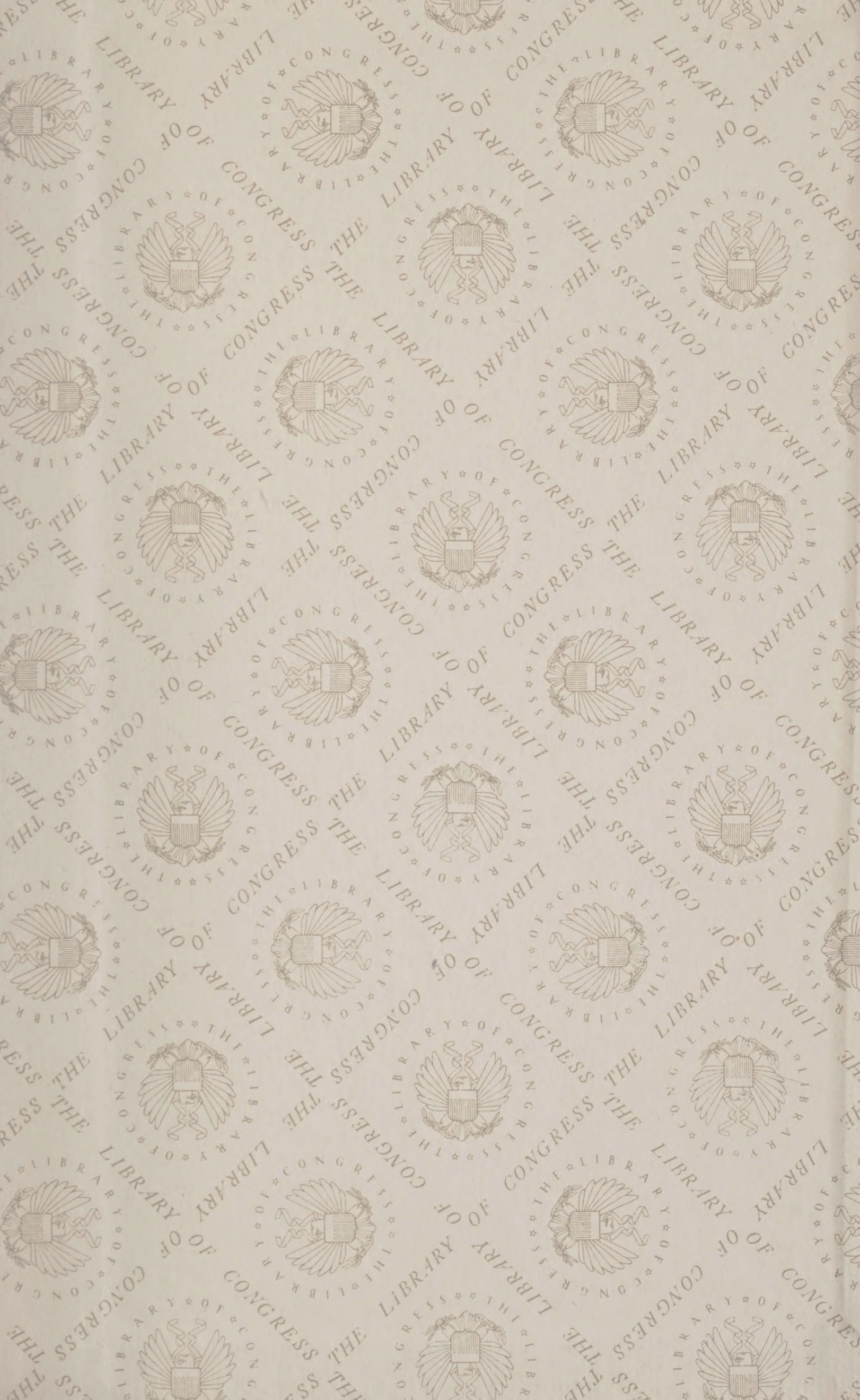
Happily they did not have to leave. A change of wind, followed by a fierce and drenching rain-storm, put them all out of danger from the forest fire. It was while watching the storm gather and sweep down from the north that Rex remembered something, and turned abruptly to Bruce Brigham.

"See here, old man," he said, "I've not apologized for being such a cad when you spoke to me

this morning. I never told you how sorry I was for throwing you down."

Brigham smiled a slow, embarrassed smile. "You didn't have to tell me," he returned. "You showed me."

THE END.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



00021201212